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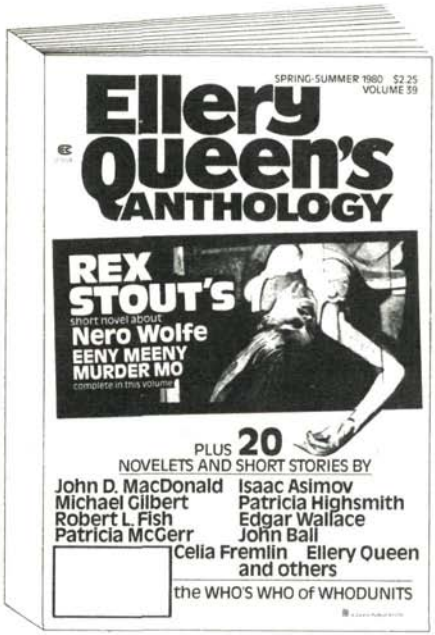

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PRESIDENT & PUBLISHER: *Joel Davis* EDITOR-IN-CHIEF: *Ellery Queen*

Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine, Vol. 75, No.3, Whole No. 437, March 10, 1980. Published 13 times a year, every 28 days, by Davis Publications, Inc., at $1.35 a copy. Annual subscription $16.25 in U.S.A. and possessions; $18.50 elsewhere. Allow 6 to 8 weeks for change of address. Editorial and Executive Offices, 380 Lexington Ave., N.Y., N.Y. 10017, (212) 557-9100. Subscription orders and mail regarding subscriptions should be sent to P.O. Box 2600, Greenwich, Ct. 06835. Application to mail at controlled circulation rates is pending at Dallas, PA. *© 1980 by Davis Publications, Inc., all rights reserved. Protection secured under the Universal Copyright Convention and the Pan American Copyright Convention. ELLERY QUEEN'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE® is the registered trademark of Ellery Queen. Printed in U.S.A. Submission must be accompanied by stamped self-addressed envelope. The Publisher assumes no responsibility for unsolicited manuscripts.*

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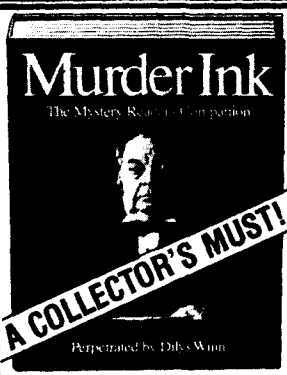

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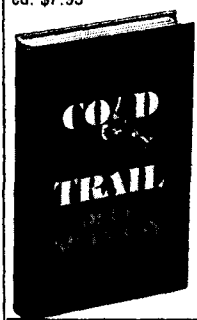

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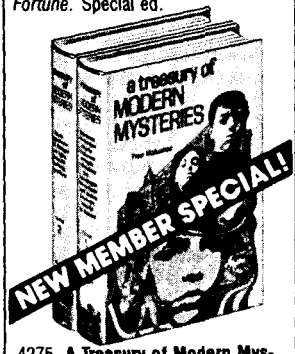

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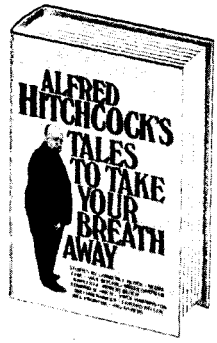

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a ***NEW*** **short story by**

RUTH RENDELL

Mrs. Avice Julian, a sharp-witted eighty-four, spent most of her time at her bay window, watching her neighbors. It was a dangerous pastime—for Mrs. Julian fancied herself an Aged Female Sleuth, another Miss Marple or Miss Silver. But between her watching and her knitting, Mrs. Julian observed goings-on that, at the least, were suspicious, and "who else has behind them a lifetime of knowledge of human nature? Who else has suffered sufficient disillusionment to be able to face unpalatable facts so squarely?" as an Aged Female Sleuth . . .

THE PAINTBOX HOUSES

by RUTH RENDELL

Elderly ladies as detectives are not unknown in fiction. Avice Julian could think of two or three, the creations of celebrated authors, and no doubt there were more. It would seem that the quiet routine of an old woman's life, her penchant for gossip and for knitting, and her curiosity born of boredom provide a suitable climate for the consideration of motive and the assessment of clues. In fiction, that is. Would it, Mrs. Julian had sometimes wondered, also be true in reality?

She took a personal interest. She was 84 years old, thin, sharp-witted, arthritic, cantankerous, and intolerant. Most of her time she spent sitting in an upright chair in the bay window of her drawing room in her very large house, observing what her neighbors were up to. From the elderly ladies of mystery fiction, though, she differed in one important respect: they were usually spinsters, she was a widow. In fact, she had been twice married and twice widowed.

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Could that, she asked herself, after reading a particularly apposite detective novel, be of significance? Could it affect the deductive powers, could it be her spinsterhood that made Miss Marple, say, a detective of genius? Perhaps. Anthropologists say (Mrs. Julian was an erudite person) that in ancient societies maidenhood was revered as having awesome and unique powers. It might be that this was true and that prolonged virginity, though in many respects disagreeable, only serves to enhance those powers.

Possibly, one day, she would have an opportunity to test the Aged Female Sleuth theory. She saw enough from her window, sitting there knitting herself a twinset in dark-blue two-ply. None of that double-knit for her. Mostly she eyed the row of houses opposite, on the other side of broad, tree-lined Abelard Avenue.

There were six of them, all joined together, all exactly the same. They all had three stories, plate-glass windows, a bit of concrete to put the car on, a flowerbed, an outside receptacle to put parcels in, and an outside receptacle to put the rubbish bag in. Mrs. Julian thought that unhygienic. She had an old-fashioned dustbin, though she had to keep a black plastic bag inside it if she wanted Northway Borough Council to collect her rubbish.

The houses had been built on the site of an old mansion. There had been several such in Abelard Avenue as well as big houses such as Mrs. Julian's which were not quite mansions. Most of these had been pulled down and those which remained converted into flats. They would do that to hers when she was gone, thought Mrs. Julian, those nephews and nieces and great-nephews and great-nieces of hers would do that. She had watched the houses opposite being built. About ten years ago now it was. She called them the paintbox houses because there was something about them that reminded her of a child's drawing and because each had its front door a different color—yellow, red, blue, lime, orange, and chocolate.

"It's called Paragon Place," said Mrs. Upton, her cleaning woman and general help, when the building was completed.

"What a ridiculous name! Paintbox Place would be far more suitable."

Mrs. Upton ignored this as she ignored all of Avice Julian's remarks which she regarded as "showing off," affected, or just plain senile. "They do say," she said, "that the next thing'll be they'll start building on this bit of waste ground next door."

"Waste ground?" said Mrs. Julian distantly. "Can you possibly mean the wood?"

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"Waste ground" had certainly been a misnomer, though "wood" was an exaggeration. It was a couple of rustic acres, more or less covered with trees of which part of one side bordered Mrs. Julian's garden, part the Great North Road, and which had its narrow frontage on Abelard Avenue. People used the path through it as a short cut to and from the station. At Mrs. Upton's unwelcome forebodings, Avice Julian had got up and gone to the right-hand side of the bay window which overlooked the "wood" and thought how disagreeable it would be to have another Paintbox Place on her back doorstep. In these days when society seemed to have gone mad, when the cost of living was frightening, when there were endless strikes and she was asked to pay 98 percent income tax on the interest on some of her investments, it was quite possible that anything could happen.

No houses, however, were built next door to Mrs. Julian. It appeared that the "wood," though hardly National Trust or an Area of Natural Beauty, was nevertheless scheduled as "not for residential development." For her lifetime, it seemed, she would look out on birch trees and green turf and small hawthorn bushes. When she was not, of course, looking out on the inhabitants of Paintbox Place, on Mr. and Mrs. Arnold and Mr. Laindon and the Nicholsons, all young people, none of them much over 40. Their activities were of absorbing interest to Mrs. Julian as she knitted away in dark-blue two-ply, and a source too of disapproval and sometimes outright condemnation.

After Christmas, in the depths of the winter, when Mrs. Julian was in the kitchen watching Mrs. Upton peeling potatoes for lunch, Mrs. Upton said, "You're lucky I'm private, have you thought of that?"

This was beyond Mrs. Julian's understanding. "I beg your pardon?"

"I mean it's lucky for you I'm not one of those council home helps. They're all coming out on strike, the lot of them coming out. They're NUPE, see? Don't you read your paper?"

Mrs. Julian certainly did read her paper, the *Daily Telegraph*, which was delivered to her door each morning. She read it from first page to last after she had had her breakfast, and she was well aware that NUPE, the National Union of Public Employees, was making rumbling noises and threatening to bring its members out over a pay increase. It was typical, in her view, of the age in which she found herself living. Someone or other was always on strike. But she had very little idea of how to identify the Public Employee and

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had hoped the threatened action would not affect her. She said as much to Mrs. Upton.

"Not affect you?" said Mrs. Upton, furiously scalping brussels sprouts. She seemed to find Mrs. Julian's innocence uproariously funny. "Well, there'll be no gritters on the roads for a start and maybe you've noticed it's snowing again. Gritters are NUPE. They'll have to close the schools, so there'll be kids all over the streets. School caretakers are NUPE. No ambulances if you fall on the ice and break your leg, no hospital porters, and what's more, no dustmen. We won't none of us get our rubbish collected on account of dustmen are NUPE. So how about that for not affecting you?"

Mrs. Julian's dustbin, kept just inside the front gate on a concrete slab and concealed from view by a laurel bush and a cotoneaster, was not emptied that week. On the following Monday she looked out of the right-hand side of the bay window and saw under the birch trees, on the frosty ground, a dozen or so black plastic bags, apparently filled with rubbish, their tops secured with wire fasteners. There was no end to the propensities of some people for making disgusting litter, thought Mrs. Julian, give them half a chance. She would telephone Northway Council, she would telephone the police. But first she would put on her squirrel coat, take her stick, go out, and have a good look.

The snow had melted, the pavement was wet. A car had pulled up and a young woman in jeans and a pair of those silly boots that come up to the thighs was taking two more black plastic bags out of the back of the car. Mrs. Julian was on the point of telling her in no uncertain terms to remove her rubbish at once, when she caught sight of a notice stuck up under the trees. The notice was of plywood with printing on it in red chalk: *Northway Council Refuse Tip. Bags This Way.*

Mrs. Julian went back into her house. She told Mrs. Upton about the refuse tip and Mrs. Upton said she already knew but she hadn't told Mrs. Julian because it would only upset her.

"You don't know what the world's coming to, do you?" said Mrs. Upton, opening a tin of peaches for lunch.

"I most certainly do know," said Mrs. Julian. "Anarchy. Anarchy is what it is coming to."

Throughout the week the refuse on the tip mounted. Fortunately, the weather was very cold; as yet there was no smell. In Paintbox Place black plastic bags of rubbish began to appear outside the receptacle doors, on the steps beside the colored front doors, over-

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flowing into the narrow flowerbeds. Mrs. Upton came five days a week but not on Saturdays or Sundays. When the doorbell rang at ten on Saturday morning, Mrs. Julian answered it herself and there outside was Mr. Arnold from the house with the red front door, behind him on the gravel drive a wheelbarrow containing five black plastic bags of rubbish.

He was a good-looking, cheerful, polite man was Mr. Arnold. Forty-two or three, she supposed. Sometimes she fancied she had seen a melancholy look in his eyes. No wonder, she thought, she could well understand if he was melancholy. He said good morning, and he was on his way to the tip with his rubbish and Mr. Laindon's and could he take hers too?

"That's very kind and thoughtful of you, Mr. Arnold," said Mrs. Julian. "You'll find my bag inside the dustbin at the gate. I do appreciate it."

"No trouble," said Mr. Arnold. "I'll make a point of collecting your bag, shall I, while the strike lasts?"

Mrs. Julian thought. A plan was forming in her mind. "That won't be necessary, Mr. Arnold. I shall be disposing of my waste by other means. Composting, burning," she said, "beating tins flat, that kind of thing. Now if everyone were to do the same—"

"Ah, life's too short for that, Mrs. Julian," said Mr. Arnold and he smiled and went off with his wheelbarrow before she could say what she was about to say, that it was shorter for her than for most people.

She watched him take her bag out of the dustbin and trundle his barrow up the slope and along the path between the wet black mounds. Poor man. Many an evening, when Mr. Arnold was working late, she had seen the chocolate front door open and young Mr. Laindon, divorced, they said, just before he came there, emerge and tap at the red front door and be admitted. Once she had seen Mrs. Arnold and Mr. Laindon coming back from the station together, taking the short cut through the "wood." They had been enjoying each other's company and laughing, though it had been cold and quite late, at least ten at night. And here was Mr. Arnold performing kindly little services for Mr. Laindon, all innocent of how he was deceived. Or perhaps he was not quite innocent, not quite ignorant, and that accounted for his sad eyes. Perhaps he was like Othello who doted yet doubted, suspected yet strongly loved. It was all very disagreeable, thought Avice Julian, employing one of her favorite words.

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She went into the kitchen and examined the boiler, a small coke-burning furnace disused since 1963 when the late Alexander Julian had installed central heating. The chimney, she was sure, was swept, so the boiler could be used again. Tins could be hammered flat and stacked temporarily in the garden shed. And—why not?—she would start a compost heap. No one should be without a compost heap at the best of times, any alternative was most wasteful.

Her neighbors might contribute to the squalor; she would not. Presently she wrapped herself up in her late husband's Burberry and made her way down to the end of the garden. On the "wood" side, in the far corner, that would be the place. Up against the fence, thought Mrs. Julian. She found a bundle of stout sticks in the shed—Alexander had once grown runner beans up them—and, selecting four of these, she managed to drive them into the soft earth, one at each of the angles of a roughly conceived square. Next a strip of chicken wire went round the posts to form an enclosure. She would get Mrs. Upton to buy her some garotta next time she went shopping. Avice Julian knew all about making compost heaps—she and her first husband had been experts during the war. Now she felt quite excited by what she had done, though tired.

In the afternoon, refreshed by a nap, she emptied the vegetable cupboard and found some strange potatoes growing stems and leaves and some carrots covered in blue fur. Mrs. Upton was not a hygienic housekeeper. The potatoes and carrots formed the foundations of the new compost heap. Mrs. Julian pulled up a handful of weeds and scattered them on the top.

"I shall have my work cut out, I can see that," said Mrs. Upton on Monday morning. She laughed unpleasantly. "I'm sure I don't know when the cleaning'll get done if I'm traipsing up and down the garden path all day long."

Between them they got the boiler alight and fed it Saturday's *Daily Telegraph* and Sunday's *Observer*. Mrs. Upton hammered out a tin that had contained baked beans and banged her thumb. She made a tremendous fuss about it which Mrs. Julian tried to ignore. Mrs. Julian went back to her window, cast on for the second sleeve of the dark-blue two-ply jumper, and watched women coming in cars with their rubbish bags for the tip. Some of them hardly bothered to set foot on the pavement but opened the trunk compartments of their cars and hurled the bags from where they stood. With extreme distaste, Mrs. Julian watched one of these bags strike the trunk of a tree and burst open, scattering tins and glass and peelings and

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leavings and dregs and grounds in all directions.

During the last week of January, Mrs. Julian always made her marmalade. She saw no reason to discontinue this custom because she was 84. Grumbling and moaning about her back and her varicose veins, Mrs. Upton went out to buy preserving sugar and Seville oranges. Mrs. Julian peeled potatoes and prepared a cabbage for lunch, carrying the peelings and the outer leaves down the garden to the compost heap herself. Most of the orange peel would go there in due course. Mrs. Julian's marmalade was the clear jelly kind with only strands of rind in it, pared hair-thin.

They made the first batch in the afternoon. Mr. Arnold called on the following morning with his barrow. "Your private refuse operative, Mrs. Julian, at your service."

"Ah, but I've done what I told you I should do," she said, and insisted on his coming down the garden with her to see the compost heap.

"You do eat a lot of oranges," said Mr. Arnold.

Then she told him about the marmalade and Mr. Arnold said he had never tasted homemade marmalade, he didn't know people made it any more. This shocked Mrs. Julian and rather confirmed her opinion of Mrs. Arnold. She gave him a jar of marmalade and he was profuse in his thanks.

She was glad to get indoors again. The meteorological people had been right when they said there was another cold spell coming. Mrs. Julian knitted and looked out of the window and saw Mrs. Arnold brought back from somewhere or other by Mr. Laindon in his car. By lunchtime it had begun to snow. The heavy, gray, louring sky looked full of snow.

This did not deter Mrs. Julian's great-niece from dropping in unexpectedly with her boy friend. They said frankly that they had come to look at the rubbish tip which was reputed to be the biggest in London apart from the one which filled the whole of Leicester Square. They stood in the window staring at it and giggling each time anyone arrived with fresh offerings.

"It's surrealistic!" shrieked the great-niece as a bag, weighted down with snow, rolled slowly out of the branches of a tree where it had been suspended for some days. "It's fantastic! I could stand here all day just watching it."

Mrs. Julian was very glad that she departed after about an hour (with a jar of marmalade) to something called the Screen on the Hill which turned out to be a cinema in Hampstead. After they had gone

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it snowed harder than ever. There was a heavy frost that night and the next.

"You don't want to set foot outside," said Mrs. Upton on Monday morning. "The pavements are like glass." And she went off into a long tale about her son Brian who was a police constable finding an old lady who had slipped and was lying helpless on the ice.

Mrs. Julian nodded impatiently. "I have no intention of going outside. And you must be very careful when you go down that path to the compost heap."

They made a second batch of marmalade. The boiler refused to light, so Mrs. Julian said to leave it but try again tomorrow, for there was quite an accumulation of newspapers to be burned. Mrs. Julian sat in the window, sewing together the sections of the dark-blue two-ply jumper and watching the people coming through the snow to the refuse tip. Capped with snow, the mounds on the tip resembled a mountain range. In the Arctic perhaps, thought Mrs. Julian fancifully, or on some planet where the temperature was always sub-zero.

All the week it snowed and froze and snowed and melted and froze again. Mrs. Julian stayed indoors. Her nephew, the one who wrote science fiction, phoned to ask if she was all right, and her other nephew, the one who was a commercial photographer, came round to sweep her drive clear of snow. By the time he arrived Mr. Laindon had already done it, but Mrs. Julian gave him a jar of marmalade just the same. She had resisted giving one to Mr. Laindon because of the way he was carrying on with Mrs. Arnold.

It started thawing on Saturday. Mrs. Julian sat in the window, casting on for the left front of her cardigan and watching the snow and ice drip away and flow down the gutters. She left the curtains undrawn, as she often did, when it got dark.

At about eight Mrs. Arnold came out of the red front door and Mr. Laindon came out of the chocolate front door and they stood chatting and laughing together until Mr. Arnold came out. Mr. Arnold unlocked the doors of his car and said something to Mr. Laindon. How Mrs. Julian wished she could have heard what it was! Mr. Laindon only shook his head. She saw Mrs. Arnold get quickly into the car and shut the door. Very cowardly, not wanting to get involved, thought Mrs. Julian. Mr. Arnold was arguing now with Mr. Laindon, trying to persuade him to do something apparently. Perhaps to leave Mrs. Arnold alone. But all Mr. Laindon did was give a silly sort of laugh and retreat into the house with the chocolate

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door. The Arnolds went off, Mr. Arnold driving recklessly fast in this sort of weather, as if he were fearfully late for wherever they were going or, more likely, in a great rage.

Mrs. Julian saw nothing of Mr. Laindon on the following day, the Sunday, but in the afternoon she saw Mrs. Arnold go out on her own. She crossed the road from Paintbox Place and took the path, still mercifully clear of rubbish bags, through the "wood" toward the station. Off to a secret assignation, Mrs. Julian supposed. The weather was drier and less cold but she felt no inclination to go out. She sat in the window, doing the ribbing part of the left front of her cardigan and noting that the rubbish bags were mounting again in Paintbox Place. For some reason, laziness perhaps or depression over his wife's conduct, Mr. Arnold had failed to clear them away on Saturday morning. Mrs. Julian had a nap and a cup of tea and read the *Observer*.

It pleased her that Mrs. Upton had apparently burned up all the old newspapers. At any rate, there was none to be seen. But what had she done with the empty tins? Mrs. Julian looked everywhere for the hammered-out, empty tins. She looked in the kitchen cupboards and the cupboards under the stairs and even in the dining room and the morning room. You never knew with people like Mrs. Upton. Perhaps she had actually done what her employer suggested and put them in the shed.

Mrs. Julian went back to the living room, back to her window, and got there just in time to see Mr. Arnold letting himself into his house. Time tended to pass slowly for her on the weekends and she was surprised to find it was as late as nine o'clock. It had begun to rain. She could see the slanting rain shining gold in the light from the lamps in Paintbox Place.

She sat in the window and picked up her knitting. After a little while the red front door opened and Mr. Arnold came out. He had changed out of his wet clothes, changed gray trousers for dark brown, blue jacket for sweater and anorak. He took hold of the nearest rubbish bag and dragged it just inside the door. Within a minute or two he had come out again, carrying the bag, which he loaded onto the barrow he fetched from the parking area.

It was at this point that Mrs. Julian's telephone rang. The phone was at the other end of the room. Mrs. Julian's caller was the older of her nephews, the commercial photographer, wanting to know if he might borrow pieces from her Second Empire bedroom furniture for some set or background. They had all enjoyed the marmalade,

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it was nearly gone. Mrs. Julian said he should have another jar of marmalade next year but he certainly could not borrow her furniture. She didn't want pictures of her wardrobe and dressing table all over these vulgar magazines, thank you very much. When she returned to her point of vantage at the window Mr. Arnold had disappeared.

Disappeared, that is, from the forecourt of Paintbox Place. Mrs. Julian crossed to the right-hand side of the bay window to draw the curtains and shut out the rain, and there he was, scaling the wet, slippery, black mountains, clutching a rubbish bag in his hand. The bag looked none too secure, for its side had been punctured by the neck of a bottle and its top was fastened not with a wire fastener but wound round and round with blue string. Finally he dropped it at the side of one of the high mounds round the birch tree. Mrs. Julian drew the curtains.

Mrs. Upton arrived punctually in the morning, agog with her news. It was a blessing she had such a strong constitution, Mrs. Julian thought. Many a woman of her advanced years would have been made ill—or worse—by hearing a thing like that.

"How can you possibly know?" she said. "There's nothing in this morning's paper."

Brian, of course. Brian, the policeman.

"She was coming home from the station," said Mrs. Upton, "through that bit of waste ground." She cocked a thumb in the direction of the "wood." "Asking for trouble, wasn't she? Nasty dark lonely place. This chap, whoever he was, he clouted her over the head with what they call a blunt instrument. That was about half-past eight, though they never found her till ten. Brian says there was blood all over, turned him up proper it did, and him used to it."

"What a shocking thing," said Mrs. Julian. "What a dreadful thing. Poor Mrs. Arnold."

"Murdered for the cash in her handbag, though there wasn't all that much. No one's safe these days."

When such an event takes place it is almost impossible for some hours to deflect one's thoughts to any other subject. Her knitting lying in her lap, Mrs. Julian sat in the window, contemplating the paintbox houses. A vehicle that was certainly a police car, though it had no blue lamp, arrived in the course of the morning and two policemen in plainclothes were admitted to the house with the red front door. Presumably by Mr. Arnold who was not, however, visible to Mrs. Julian.

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What must it be like to lose, in so violent a manner, one's marriage partner? Even so unsatisfactory a marriage partner as poor Mrs. Arnold had been. Did Mr. Laindon know, Mrs. Julian wondered. She found herself incapable of imagining what his feelings must be. No one came out of or went into any of the houses in Paintbox Place and at one o'clock Mrs. Julian had to leave her window and go into the dining room for lunch.

"Of course you know what the police always say, don't you?" said Mrs. Upton, sticking a rather underdone lamb chop in front of her. "The husband's always the first to be suspected. Shows marriage up in a shocking light, don't you reckon?"

Mrs. Julian made no reply but merely lifted her shoulders. Both her husbands had been devoted to her and she told herself that she had no personal experience of the kind of uncivilized relationship Mrs. Upton was talking about. But could she say the same for Mr. Arnold? Had she not, in fact, for weeks, for months now, been deploring the state of the Arnolds' marriage and even awaiting some fearful climax?

It was at this point, or soon after when she was back in her window, that Avice Julian first began to see herself as a possible Miss Marple or Miss Silver, though she had not recently been reading the works of either of those ladies' creators. Rather it was that she saw the sound common sense which lay behind the notion of elderly women as detectives. Who else has the leisure to be so observant? Who else has behind them a lifetime of knowledge of human nature? Who else has suffered sufficient disillusionment to be able to face unpalatable facts so squarely?

Beyond a doubt, the facts Mrs. Julian was facing were unpalatable. Nevertheless, she marshalled them. Mrs. Arnold had been an unfaithful wife. She had been conducting some sort of love affair with Mr. Laindon. That Mr. Arnold had not known of it was evident from her conduct of this extra-marital adventure in his absence. That he was beginning to be aware of it was apparent from his behavior of Saturday evening. What more probable than that he had set off to meet his wife at the station on Sunday evening, had quarreled with her about this very matter, and had struck her down in a jealous rage? When Mrs. Julian had seen him first he had been running home from the scene of the crime, clutching to him under his jacket the weapon for which Mrs. Upton said the police were still searching.

The morning had been dull and damp but after lunch it had dried

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up and a weak watery sun come out. Mrs. Julian put on her squirrel coat and went out into the garden, the first time she had been out for nine days.

The compost heap had not increased much in size. Perhaps the weight of snow had flattened it down or, more likely, Mrs. Upton had failed in her duty. Displeased, Mrs. Julian went back into the front garden and down to the gate where she lifted the lid of her dustbin, confident of what she would find inside. But, no, she had done Mrs. Upton an injustice. The dustbin was empty and quite clean. She stood by the fence and viewed the tip.

What an eyesore it was! A considerable amount of leakage, due to careless packing and fastening, had taken place, and the wet, fetid, black hillocks were strewn all over with torn and soggy paper, cartons and packages, while in the valleys between clustered, like some evil growth, a conglomeration of decaying fruit and vegetable parings, mildewed bread, tea leaves, coffee grounds, and broken glass. In one hollow there was movement. Maggots or the twitching nose of a rat? Mrs. Julian shuddered and looked hastily away. She raised her eyes to take in the continued presence under the birch tree of the bag Mr. Arnold had deposited there on the previous evening, the bag that was punctured by the neck of a bottle and bound with blue string.

She returned to the house. Was she justified in keeping this knowledge to herself? There was by then no doubt in her mind as to what Mr. Arnold had done. After killing his wife he had run home, changed his bloodstained clothes for clean ones, and fetching in the rubbish bag from outside, inserted into it the garments he had just removed and the blunt instrument, so-called, he had used. An iron bar, perhaps, or a length of metal piping he had picked up in the "wood." In so doing he had mislaid the wire fastener and could find no other, so he had been obliged to fasten the bag with the nearest thing to hand, a piece of string. Then across the road with it as he had been on several previous occasions, this time to deposit there a bag containing evidence that would incriminate him if found on his property. But what could be more anonymous than a black plastic rubbish bag on a council refuse tip? There it would be only one among a hundred and, he must have supposed, impossible of identification.

Mrs. Julian disliked the idea of harming her kind and thoughtful neighbor. But justice must be done. If she was in possession of knowledge the police could not otherwise acquire, it was plainly her duty

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to reveal it. And the more she thought of it the more convinced she was that here was the correct solution to the crime against Mrs. Arnold. Would not Miss Seeton have thought so? And Miss Silver? Would not Miss Marple, having found parallels between Mr. Arnold's behavior and that of some St. Mary Mead husband, having considered and weighed the awful significance of the quarrel on Saturday night and the extraordinary circumstance of taking rubbish to a tip at nine thirty on a wet Sunday evening, would she not have laid the whole matter before the C.I.D.?

She hesitated for only a few minutes before fetching the telephone directory and looking up the number. By three o'clock in the afternoon she was making a call to her local police station.

The detective sergeant and detective constable who came to see Mrs. Julian less than half an hour later showed no surprise at being supplied with information by such as she. Perhaps they too read the works of the inventors of elderly lady sleuths. They treated Mrs. Julian with great courtesy and after she had told them what she suspected they suggested she accompany them to the vicinity of the tip and point out the incriminating bag.

It was quite possible, however, for her to do this from the right-hand side of the bay window. The detectives nodded and wrote things down in notebooks and thanked her and went away, and after a little while a van arrived and a policeman in uniform got out and removed the bag. Mrs. Julian sat in the window, working away at the lacy pattern on the front of her dark-blue two-ply cardigan and watching for the arrest of Mr. Arnold. She watched with trepidation and fear for him and a reluctant sympathy. There were policemen about the area all day, tramping around among the rubbish bags, investigating gardens and ringing doorbells, but none of them went to arrest Mr. Arnold.

Nothing happened at all apart from Mr. Laindon calling at eight in the evening. He seemed very upset and his face looked white and drawn. He had come, he said, to ask Mrs. Julian if she would care to contribute to the cost of a wreath for Mrs. Arnold or would she be sending flowers personally?

"I should prefer to see to my own little floral tribute," said Mrs. Julian rather frostily.

"Just as you like, of course. I'm really going round asking people to give myself something to do. I feel absolutely bowled over by this business. They were wonderful to me, the Arnolds, you know. You couldn't have better friends. I was feeling pretty grim when I first

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came here—my divorce and all that—and the Arnolds—well, they looked after me like family, never let me be on my own, even insisted I go out with them. And now a terrible thing like this has to happen and to a wonderful person like that . . ."

Mrs. Julian had no wish to listen to this sort of thing. No doubt, there were some gullible enough to believe it. She went to bed wondering if the arrest would take place during the night, discreetly, so that the neighbors should not witness it.

The paintbox houses looked just the same in the morning. But of course they would. The arrest of Mr. Arnold would hardly affect their appearance. The phone rang at nine thirty and Mrs. Upton took the call. She came into the morning room where Mrs. Julian was finishing her breakfast.

"The police want to come round and see you again. I said I'd ask. I said you mightn't be up to it, not being so young as you used to be."

"Neither are you or they," said Mrs. Julian and then she spoke to the police herself and told them to come whenever it suited them.

During the next half hour some agreeable fantasies went round in Mrs. Julian's head. Such is often the outcome of identifying with characters in fiction. She imagined herself congratulated on her acumen and even, on a future occasion when some other baffling crime had taken place, consulted by policemen of high rank. Mrs. Upton had served her well on the whole, as well as could be expected in these trying times. Perhaps one day, when it came to the question of Brian's promotion, a word from her in the right place . . .

The doorbell rang. It was the same detective sergeant and detective constable. Mrs. Julian was a little disappointed, she had thought she rated an inspector now. They greeted her with jovial smiles and invited her into her own kitchen where they said they had something to show her. Between them they were lugging a large canvas sack.

The sergeant asked Mrs. Upton if she could find them a sheet of newspaper, and before Mrs. Julian could say that they had burned all their newspapers, Saturday's *Daily Telegraph* was produced from where it had been secreted. Then, to Mrs. Julian's amazement, he pulled out of the canvas sack the black plastic rubbish bag, punctured on one side and secured at the top with blue string, which she had seen Mr. Arnold deposit on the tip on Sunday evening.

"I hope you won't find it too distasteful, madam," he said, "just to cast your eyes over some of the contents of this bag."

Mrs. Julian was astounded that he should ask such a thing of

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someone of her age. But she indicated with a faint nod and wave of her hand that she would comply, while inwardly she braced herself for the sight of some hideous bludgeon, perhaps encrusted with blood and hair, and for the emergence from the depths of the bag of a bloodstained jacket and pair of trousers. She would not faint or cry out, she was determined on that, whatever she might see.

It was the constable who untied the string and spread open the neck of the bag. With care, the sergeant began to remove its contents and to drop them on the newspaper Mrs. Upton had laid on the floor. He dropped them, insofar as he could, in small separate heaps: a quantity of orange peel, a few lengths of dark-blue two-ply knitting wool, innumerable Earl Grey teabags, potato peelings, cabbage leaves, a lamb-chop bone, the sherry bottle whose neck had pierced the side of the sack, and seven copies of the *Daily Telegraph* with one of the *Observer*, all with *Julian, 1 Abelard Avenue* scrawled above the masthead.

Mrs. Julian surveyed her kitchen floor. She looked at the sergeant and the constable and at the yard or so of dark-blue two-ply knitting wool which he still held in his hand and which he had unwound from the neck of the bag.

"I fail to understand," she said.

"I'm afraid this sack would appear to contain waste from your own household, Mrs. Julian," said the sergeant. "In other words, to have been yours and been disposed of from your premises."

Mrs. Julian sat down. She sat down rather heavily on one of the bentwood chairs and fixed her eyes on the opposite wall and felt a strange tingling hot sensation in her face that she hadn't experienced for 60 years. She was blushing.

"I see," she said.

The constable began stuffing the garbage back into the bag. Mrs. Upton watched him, giggling.

"If you haven't consumed all our stock of sherry, Mrs. Upton," said Mrs. Julian, "perhaps we might offer these two gentlemen a glass."

The policemen, though on duty which Mrs. Julian had formerly supposed put the consumption of alcohol out of the question, took two glasses apiece. They were not at a loss for words and chatted away with Mrs. Upton, possibly on the subject of the past and future exploits of Brian. Mrs. Julian scarcely listened and said nothing.

She understood perfectly what had happened—Mr. Arnold changing his clothes because they were wet, deciding to empty his rubbish

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that night because he had forgotten or failed to do so on the Saturday morning, gathering up his own and very likely Mr. Laindon's too. At that point she had left the window to go to the telephone. In the few minutes during which she had been talking to her nephew, Mr. Arnold had passed her gate with his barrow, lifted the lid of her dustbin, and finding a full bag within, taken it with him. It was this bag, her own, that she had seen him disposing of on the tip when she had next looked out.

No wonder the boiler had hardly ever been alight, no wonder the compost heap had scarcely grown. Once the snow and frost began and she knew her employer meant to remain indoors, Mrs. Upton had abandoned the hygiene regimen and reverted to bag and dustbin. And this was what it had led to.

The two policemen left, obligingly discarding the bag on to the tip as they passed it. Mrs. Upton looked at Mrs. Julian, and Mrs. Julian looked at Mrs. Upton, and Mrs. Upton said very brightly, "Well, I wonder what all that was about then?"

Mrs. Julian longed and longed for the old days when she would have given her notice on the spot, but that was impossible now. Where would she find a replacement? So all she said was, knowing it to be incomprehensible:

"A *faux pas*, Mrs. Upton, that's what it was," and walked slowly off and into the living room where she picked up her knitting from the chair by the window and carried it into the farthest corner of the room.

As a detective she was a failure. Yet, ironically, it was directly owing to her efforts that Mrs. Arnold's murderer was brought to justice. Mrs. Julian could not long keep away from her window and when she returned to it the next day it was to see the council men dismantling the tip and removing the bags to some distant disposal unit or incinerator. As her newspaper had told her, the strike was over. But the hunt for the murder weapon was not. There was more room to maneuver and investigate now that the rubbish was gone. By nightfall the weapon had been found and 24 hours later the young out-of-work mechanic who had struck Mrs. Arnold down for the contents of her handbag had been arrested and charged.

They traced him through the spanner with which he had killed her and which, passing Mrs. Julian's garden fence, he had thrust into the depths of her compost heap.

"Q"

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"Something was very wrong out there in the night" . . .

DEATH DANCE

by EDWARD WELLEN

The travel magazine that Sam Martin wanted to flip through lay on the sofa at the other end of the living room. Martin pulled himself onto his crutches and swung in easy scallops across the room, past the windows open to the night.

A sidelong glance showed him a night sky that the windstorm had sandblasted clean and smooth. A bright darkness. He goose-fleshed. It was on a polished night like this, two long years ago, that the other car had jumped the divider and slammed into his.

He smiled. Life is funny. Sometimes what you think is bad turns out to be good, and the other way around.

The evening seemed to be taking on a chill, but Martin did not close the windows or start a fire in the fireplace. He felt warm enough with the golden glow of the $1,000,000-plus soon to be his.

What to do first? Take a tropical cruise? A camera safari? Sign up for a Holy Land dig? A world of wonderful things to choose from awaited him. Above all, romance. After his two-year ordeal he was more than ready for romance. Meanwhile, he sought suggestions. One more easy arc would bring him in reach of the magazine and its packaged dreams.

He never reached it.

Something was very wrong out there in the night.

His was the last house on the street. Past it the road came to a dead halt. Overarching trees balked light from the street lamp, so right there was a nice dark lovers' lane that could not have been nicer or darker if the planning commission had planned and commissioned it. Ever since the town had cut down on its police force to stay within the budget, the patrolling had gone from regular to seldom. Of late, couples had taken to parking in the shadows for a few hours.

Well, it was none of Martin's business. Live and let live, love and

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let love. Still, he didn't much like it going on this close to home. So he had got into the habit of shutting his mind to it, of not looking and not listening.

But just now he had heard what sounded like a muffled cry, and he tied it to the car that, a few minutes before, had pulled subliminally into the shadows of the trees and of his mind.

And now, holding his breath and listening hard, he heard a car door open and slam, heard high heels click, heard another door open and heavier feet hit, heard a young woman's voice cry out, "Somebody please help me! He's killing me!"

Martin froze in midswing, trying at one and the same time to think and not think of what he had heard.

"Please help—!" Something swallowed up the "me."

He had to swing his whole body half around to face the window. Grimacing at the check that the neck brace put on his moves, he pivoted on one crutch and shoved with the other. Leaning forward heavily on the crutches, he looked out.

At the edge of shadow two entwined figures swayed almost in dance, but the man had his hand clamped over the woman's mouth.

Just a lover's quarrel. That's all. Nothing more. Don't mix in.

The swaying grew more violent.

Even if it's something more, don't get involved.

The woman broke free. A knife glinted in the man's hand and what had to be blood stained the woman's white dress.

Before Martin could pull himself back out of sight the woman's glance hit him a jarring blow. Any other time it would have been her beauty that hit him. Now it was her wildly imploring gaze, threatening to draw him into something messy, that dealt him the jolt.

The woman moved slowly and weakly. The man caught hold of her again. But her mouth slipped his hand. Martin heard a voice on the thin edge of terror. "Please help me! Help!"

Martin hung limp on his crutches. What to do? He looked around, brace or no brace, as wildly as the woman.

His phone. He could at least dial 911.

Uncradling the phone, he knew before he dialed that the phone was dead. He tried all the same. He couldn't raise the operator. Maybe it was an effect of the windstorm, for the phone had worked earlier. He cradled the useless phone.

Martin stood still, fists tight, body stiff against trembling. He swung toward the window.

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The two were in their death dance. There was another spot on the white dress.

Martin felt a twitch in his cheek. He drew breath, then hurled his voice. "Get away from the girl! Leave her alone!"

The man turned a savage face toward Martin. "Make me!"

Martin swung back from the window. He heard the man's laugh. Martin flung the crutches from him, ran to the fireplace, picked the poker from its stand, felt the power in his shoulders and arms, and ran out the front door.

The man froze, the woman ceased to struggle. Both stood watching him.

The car's spotlight switched on and hit him. Martin squeezed his gaze past the glare. He stopped short, too late. He understood in a flash. Inside the car a third person had popped up to aim a movie camera at Martin, silently recording two sound legs. Martin went cold with the knowledge that he had just blown the $1,000,000-plus settlement.

"Q"

DETECTIVERSE

PERFECTLY MURDEROUS

by SJAAN CLERC

On planning perfect homicides
I breezily admit,
So easily conceived of,
They're murder to commit.

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"Q"

a SHORT NOVEL by

WHIT MASTERSON

complete in this issue

When Whit Masterson (Robert Wade) wrote a newspaper article last year on Ellery Queen's 50th Anniversary—the first EQ book, THE ROMAN HAT MYSTERY, *was published in 1929—he called your Editor's attention to one of his own favorite stories and one of his biggest disappointments. The story was originally titled "Seek Him in Shadows," and appeared in "Argosy," issue of April 1966, under the title of "What Happened to Timothy Owen?" Mr. Wade wrote: "It was—in my wholly unbiased opinion—one of the best things I ever did but, aside from a brief flurry of film interest, went absolutely nowhere."*

Well, this is the kind of challenge we simply can't resist. We asked for the text, read the story, agreed with Mr. Wade that it is indeed one of his best, and are happy to bring it back into print after fourteen years.

"Seek Him in Shadows" is the type of short novel that has virtually disappeared from the mystery scene (partly because so many fiction magazines have disappeared). It has all the elements that make for edge-of-your-chair reading: a mystery twenty years old, suspense, conflict, romance, tragedy, fascinating characters, and a strong narrative style . . . As one of our reading staff reported: "a vivid, striking story of a family caught up in its past" . . .

(story begins on the next page)

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(editorial introduction on the preceding page)

SEEK HIM IN SHADOWS

by WHIT MASTERSON

The telephone was ringing as he let himself into his apartment. The woman on the other end of the line attempted to disguise her voice, but it was Libby, of course. "I have an important message for a Mr. Robert Wilson, brilliant young electronics engineer."

"Sounds promising."

"The Robert Wilson I want is twenty-seven years old, six feet tall, has a receding hairline and wears horn-rimmed glasses. In certain circles, he's considered a real doll."

"You've found him," he said, chuckling.

"Congratulations, Mr. Wilson! You have just won our giant jackpot prize, a date this evening with a gorgeous, charming and intelligent feature writer from *The Magazine of California Living*."

"Really? She must be a newcomer to the staff."

"Thanks a lot, you beast."

Libby abandoned the nasal pretense for her own throaty voice. "Seriously, Rob—are you available? I'm on an assignment. There's this party out at Malibu I have to go to, and I need an escort. Besides, I haven't seen you in a week, and I know how you must miss me."

"I do miss you. But the way the plant's been piling up work—"

"It's Friday, Rob! The only figures you should be working on tonight are thirty-four, twenty-four, thirty-four."

Wilson eyed his bulging briefcase and found its dimensions considerably less appealing than hers. "Okay. What time?"

"Eight o'clock. I won't be ready, but it'll be good training in case we ever get married."

It was not the first time they'd spoken of marriage during the six months they had dated. But always in the same kidding fashion, playing the subject for laughs, using flippancy as a shield to ward off any real consideration of it. Now, Rob Wilson wondered if he wasn't about ready to give the possibility serious thought. Both age and income amply justified his taking a wife. The bachelor life was beginning to pall. Libby would make a good wife; her brash descrip-

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tion of her charms was only mildly exaggerated. Yet he did not feel the overpowering excitement which he supposed should be the hallmark of true love.

As instructed, he arrived at her apartment at eight o'clock. As promised, she was not ready. Waiting, he scanned the evening newspaper. The weather bureau forecast a typical July weekend for Los Angeles—warm days, cool nights, some smog. Unlike many transplanted Easterners, Rob Wilson had no complaint about the monotonous climate. The Midwest, his former home, was sweltering. He decided he'd try again to get Mom and Pop to come out, at least for a visit. They regarded Southern California as a distant and alien land which would one day be swallowed up by a huge earthquake.

Zach and Mae Wilson had been appalled when Space Systems, Incorporated, transferred their son to the West Coast plant, even urging him to resign rather than risk destruction. Though he had somehow survived two full years, no amount of coaxing could induce them to follow him. *Perhaps they'd come to my wedding,* he thought.

Libby emerged in a cocktail dress with a daring bodice, looking nothing like a bride. The shimmering, mint-green fabric set off her dark red hair and faintly freckled complexion. She brushed a kiss across his lips and handed him a black notebook.

"Do you mind carrying this for me? It won't fit in my purse. I've been trying for ten days to get this interview, and I don't want to blow it now by looking too obvious."

"Then you shouldn't have worn that dress."

"As long as it hides me as a reporter, I'm not worried about what else it reveals. Don't be stuffy, darling. Where we're going tonight, this is a very demure little number."

As they drove west across the city toward the ocean, he said, "Maybe I *am* stuffy. Underneath my suave exterior, I'm still a simple farm boy."

" 'You've come a long way from St. Louis,' " she sang.

"St. Joseph. There's a big difference."

" 'But, baby, you've still got a long way to go.' " She snuggled against him. "You may be a bit naïve, particularly where women are concerned, but there's nothing simple about you, either. Like an iceberg, there's a lot more to you than appears on the surface."

"You make me sound pretty mysterious. I wish it were true."

"Well, this is my month for mysteries. This story I'm on has got me giving everybody the suspicious eye. Who knows what evil lurks

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in the hearts of men, et cetera. You remember the Timothy Owen case, don't you?"

"Never heard of it."

"It was bigger in California, naturally, but I didn't think anybody in the country could have missed it. Timothy Owen was the son of James Clark Owen. The Owen Corporation—surely, you've heard of that?"

"Of course. Owen did some of the basic research in electronics, practically wrote the book thirty years ago. His theory of variable—"

"Puh-leeze!" Libby begged. "All I asked was had you heard of him. Anyway, it was his son, Timothy, who disappeared. The case is still the biggest unsolved mystery that ever popped in these parts. And now that we've come to the twentieth anniversary, my boss thought that *Westward!* could use a feature on it. One of those incisive, probing dissertations for which we wish we were famous. Startling revelations, y'know. 'What Really Happened to Timothy Owen.' "

"And what really did happen?"

"I wish I knew. I've rehashed all the available information without turning up anything juicy. The only halfway new angle I've got is the sister's story—and I don't really have that yet. Gena Owen. She's the last of the Owens, and she's never talked about the tragedy for publication. I'm hoping she will tonight."

"Then this is her party we're going to?"

"Nope, this fling is being flung by Fran and Jimmie Lomax. Just to confuse you completely, Jimmie is the wife—Jamesa. Fran Lomax heads one of the big talent agencies, so we can expect that the place will be crawling with Hollywood types. Gena Owen is supposed to be there, too."

"How'd you wangle an invitation?"

She chuckled. "I didn't."

"You mean we're crashing the party?"

"Nobody minds in this town. If a party doesn't have at least one or two crashers, the hostess feels like a failure."

The Lomax house was a rambling, Spanish-style hacienda on the beach north of Malibu, one of a small colony of expensive homes reached by a private road. The grounds were illuminated by concealed floodlights, multi-colored, creating the impermanent impression of a motion picture set. The party was in full swing. A three-piece band held forth in the huge patio. A few guests were dancing. Some stood around the fire pit as if hypnotized by the flames. Most simply drifted about like flotsam on the nearby ocean.

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Rob Wilson never met his hosts. A maid welcomed Libby and him without asking their identity, directed Libby to the powder room and Bob to the bar. A cocktail was pressed on him. The nearest discussion group shifted slightly to include him. He knew none of its members, but the glass in his hand was his ticket of admission. The subject was baseball—not the Dodgers, but Little League. Wilson listened for a while, having nothing to contribute, then moved on. Most of the guests, he soon realized, were connected in some way with the entertainment world. Their conversations, no matter what the original springboard, inevitably turned back to what they liked to call "the industry." The performers were the easiest to spot—the girls by their poor complexions, the men by their long hair. The executives talked the loudest; the writers drank the most.

Libby joined him at the bar. "Having fun? Forgive me if I seem to be neglecting you, Rob. I need to keep circulating until I find you-know-who." She squeezed his hand affectionately. "Don't look so glum. Have a couple more martinis and abandon yourself to the mad pursuit of pleasure."

It was advice which the rest of the party had already adopted. No one was obviously intoxicated, but the steady consumption of liquor was raising the level of exhilaration. Voices were louder, laughter more frequent, behavior less sedate. Some of the guests took advantage of an intermission in the music to appropriate the band's instruments. A hastily formed quartet began to sing. Their place was taken by a Latin-looking girl who performed a wildly primitive dance in her bare feet.

Wilson's head was beginning to ache as it always did when he was tired. As a boy, he had been badly mangled by falling into a threshing machine. The monster had fractured most of the bones in his body, including his skull. "Squashed you like a grape," was how Pop described it. He'd spent a year in bed and a much longer time as a semi-invalid. However, the accident proved to be the proverbial silver-lined cloud. Unable to work the land alongside his father, he began to read. Through books, he first explored the world of science and staked it for his own. From that moment, there was not the slightest doubt as to what he would do with his life. His inquisitive, analytical nature probably would have set him on the same path even without the accident. Still, he was grateful to the thresher—except at moments like these, when the painful throbbing began at the base of his skull.

The raucous commotion made it worse. He looked for Libby, but

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did not see her. Apparently she had cornered the Owen woman and would not appreciate being interrupted. He returned his glass to the bar and went outside.

A crisp breeze was blowing off the Pacific. In contrast to the shrill hilarity inside, the crash of the breakers was soothing. He strolled toward the parking area, grateful for the solitude.

He became aware that he was not alone in the night. Nearby, a girl's furious voice said, "Put your hands on me again and I'll scream!"

A man's voice remonstrated, "Honey, you got to be kidding."

They stood directly in his path. The girl had her back against the trunk of a tall palm tree, and the man held her semi-captive by clasping his hands about the bole. Wilson hesitated, not wishing to intrude on their quarrel.

"I mean it, Doug. I'm warning you."

The man merely chuckled and bent to kiss her. The girl responded with a flailing of arms and legs that made him lurch back. She ducked out of his grasp and ran directly toward where Rob Wilson stood.

"Thank God, you're here!" she said, as if she had been expecting him.

Before he could reply, the man strode forward and seized her arm. "What sort of an act is this, anyway?"

"Help me!" she begged Wilson. "Don't let him hurt me."

Wilson cleared his throat. "You'd better do what she says."

"Who the hell are you?" Doug demanded, as if noticing him for the first time. He was stocky and muscular, in his early thirties, with crew-cut hair prematurely sprinkled with gray. His voice sounded as if he'd taken one drink too many. "This isn't any of your business, so butt out."

"Are you two married?" Wilson asked.

"Married?" the girl echoed with a scornful laugh. "He followed me out here, that's all. I never saw him before tonight."

"You little liar," Doug said, raising a hand to cuff her. "You need a good—"

She cowered to avoid the threatened blow. Wilson struck first. Doug sat down abruptly, blood gushing from his nose.

Wilson viewed him uncomfortably, wondering what he should do now. He had acted instinctively to protect the girl, but he felt no malice toward the other man. "Sorry," he muttered. "I didn't mean

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to hurt you."

The girl did not share his remorse. "I warned him to leave me alone. I don't know what I'd have done if you hadn't come along." She began to shiver.

"Are you all right now?"

"Feeling the reaction, I guess. I was really frightened."

"I'll take you back to the party."

"Oh, I can't stand facing that pack of clowns again. Please—would you mind driving me home?"

He hesitated. "My date's inside."

"She doesn't need you or you wouldn't be out here by yourself. I live just up on the Palisades. It's only a ten-minute drive. You can be back in less than half an hour."

He shrugged. "Okay. I'm sure I won't be missed for a half-hour."

She clutched his arm tightly as they walked to his car. "I'll never be able to thank you enough."

In the glow of the dashlight, he took a good look at her. His initial impression had been that she was a pretty girl. She was, in fact, a great deal more than that. High cheeckbones gave her face a haughty cast that was contradicted by the full, sensuous lips and dark, violet eyes. Her hair was a golden bronze, straight and long, covering her head and neck like a helmet. She wore a loose sheath dress, pumpkin-colored, that hinted at a well-formed body; below it, her calves were sleek, her ankles slender. Yet Wilson hesitated to term her beautiful. There was something about her face that disturbed him, a haunted quality, a brittle despair that she seemed too young to merit.

She was scrutinizing him also. "You look familiar. Have I met you before?"

"You may have seen me at the party tonight. Otherwise, the answer is no. My name is Wilson, Robert Wilson. My friends call me Rob."

"It fits," she decided. "Sort of ugly-handsome. Some names don't fit at all. Do I look like a Sarah to you?"

"What is a Sarah supposed to look like?"

"Oh, prim and proper."

Since neither her name nor her problem was his concern, he did not pursue the topic. She was more curious about him. As they turned onto the main highway, she asked, "You're not Hollywood, are you? I smell nothing show biz about you."

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"I'm a research engineer. Electronics."

"Then what on earth were you doing at Jimmie's party?"

"I crashed it."

"How droll," she murmured. "Do you often do things like that?"

"Tonight was the first time. Also the last."

"Take a left at the next intersection," she directed. They began to climb the hill toward the expensive residential section on the bluffs above the ocean. She said speculatively, "I'll bet it was your girl friend's idea to crash the party. You didn't really want to, but she sweet-talked you into it. Are you in love with her?"

"Isn't that a rather personal question to ask a stranger?"

"I always like to know if a man has a mortgage and who holds it."

"You'd better be careful," he warned. "I could be another Doug."

"Hardly. You're Sir Rob, my parfit gentil knight. And parfit gentil knights rescue fair damsels, not ravish them." Surprisingly, she began to laugh. "Poor Doug. You certainly smote him. I hope he'll forgive me."

"Forgive you? After what he did—"

"But he didn't do anything. Except to call me by my rightful name. I *am* a liar, Rob. I wasn't in any danger. Doug is one of my oldest friends."

Astonishment made him stammer. "What—what was the big idea?"

"A sudden impulse. When I saw you coming, I thought it might be fun to make a scene and see what you'd do about it."

"Thanks a lot," he said stiffly. "I trust you were satisfied with the results."

"Well, I didn't really expect you'd hit him. Otherwise, it worked out pretty well." She studied his angry profile. "Don't I get any points for 'fessing up, Rob? I don't often bother."

"You've had your laugh, lady. Don't milk it. All I want now is your address." A suspicion stabbed him. "Or was that part of the act, too?"

"Turn right at the top of the hill. Third house from the corner."

They drove the remainder of the distance without speaking. She had called it a house; it might more properly have been termed a mansion. Older than its occupant, it sat above the ocean like a medieval castle, surrounded by spacious lawns and gnarled pine trees. The grounds were well-kept and the building in immaculate repair, yet Wilson was touched by an odd gloom, as if he had passed

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from sunshine into shadow. He was not normally sensitive to his surroundings, but this house repelled him.

He followed the circular drive and stopped by the front steps. When she made no move to get out, he reached across and opened the door for her. "Goodbye."

"Aren't you going to kiss me good night?"

"And get clobbered by the next guy in line? No, thanks."

"Understand this," she said in a soft, dangerous voice. "I make my own rules. I don't apologize to you or any other man. I pay for my sins in my own way." She removed a fifty-dollar bill from her purse and dropped it in his lap. "This'll buy your gas. Keep the rest to polish your halo."

He flung the money back at her with equal scorn. "I don't take tips. But on second thought, I *will* take that kiss."

He ground his mouth cruelly upon hers, without passion, in primitive male reprisal against the female enemy. He found the kiss surprisingly enjoyable, his foe's lips strangely soft. But only for an instant; she broke away and slapped him.

"Let me go!" she blazed, struggling. "Get away from me. You have no right . . ." All at once, she began to sob.

"I'm sorry," he said awkwardly. Her previous behavior had been plan or pretense, but the tears were real.

She wrenched her arm free, leaped from the car and ran up the steps without a reply. The massive front door slammed behind her.

As he left, his eye was caught by a bronze plaque on the massive pillars that flanked the driveway. He stopped to read the inscription. Owen Manor. The girl had called herself Sarah, and that still might be her name. But it seemed more likely that he had played foolish knight and blundering knave to the lady of the manor herself, Gena Owen.

Libby was looking for him when he returned to the party. She was in a bad humor. The guests were dispersing; only a few hardy souls remained at the bar.

"Where have you been?" she demanded crossly. "I was beginning to think you'd run off and joined the circus."

He didn't care to explain. "I went out for air. Sorry if I worried you."

"Well, it doesn't matter. This evening's been a bust, anyway. I never did catch up with Gena Owen. Take me home, Rob."

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In the car, Libby sat closer to him than Gena Owen had done, her hand resting lightly on his thigh, unconsciously possessive. Yet this contact did not stir him as the other had. He said, "Tell me more about this story you're on, the Owen mystery."

"Must we talk shop?" Libby sighed. "It might help to turn your fine, analytical mind loose on it, at that. I'll program it for you, and you compute me an answer. To begin with, you're already familiar with James Clark Owen. The classic American dream. A poor Scottish immigrant boy who made a fortune through hard work and his own genius. Married a beautiful wife, Elinor. Had two handsome children. A boy, Timothy, and a girl two years younger, Sarah Jeanne, better known as Gena."

So her name was Sarah, Wilson reflected.

"Then one summer, twenty years ago this month, the dream went sour," Libby continued. "The family was spending the Fourth of July weekend at their lodge in the San Bernardino Mountains. Timothy Owen was seven years old, the spit 'n' image of his father, who idolized him. The two went fishing in the morning. After lunch, James Clark took a nap. Timothy, his sister Gena, and their mother Elinor went for a stroll. The kids were horsing around in the underbrush, trying to scare each other, and bickering, as kids do. Elinor didn't pay much attention. She was a permissive type, prone to migraine, the kind of mother who feels her responsibility ends in the delivery room. Pretty soon, Gena came running back to Mama, crying because her brother had hit her. Elinor passed the buck, as usual. Instead of taking out after the brat in a normal maternal rage, she told Gena they'd wait for Timothy to return and then march him back to Daddy for his whipping. Which they did—except that Timothy didn't return.

"Finally, Elinor began to call him. No answer. She began to search. No Timothy. Now panic set in. She ran back to the lodge and woke her husband. He and she, plus their manservant, a fellow named Yakel, went over the entire area. When they still couldn't locate the boy, James Clark sent Yakel for help—first the rangers, then the sheriff, finally every able-bodied man available. The result was zero. They brought in airplanes, bloodhounds, even Indian trackers from Arizona. They never found a trace of Timothy Owen then, and they've never found a trace of him since. He simply vanished into thin air—to coin a phrase."

"People don't just vanish," Wilson objected. "It's incredible."

"Exactly. That's what makes it so fascinating. I've fed you the

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facts. Suppose you grind me out the answer."

He was silent for a while, eyes fixed on the road. "I can think of four possibilities. First, that he was kidnaped."

"That's the obvious choice, of course, since he was a millionaire's son. But there was never any follow-up. A ransom note was delivered, but it turned out to be the work of a crank. And if money wasn't the motive—if he was snatched by some maniac—what happened to him afterward?"

"That's my second possibility—that he was murdered. Either in the beginning or later on."

"Fine. But no body was ever found. Despite what you may have read in fiction, it's virtually impossible to dispose of someone without leaving a clue. Particularly someone the whole country is looking for. The Owen family offered a quarter of a million in reward money, enough to make everybody eye his neighbor with hopeful suspicion. The reward was never claimed."

"Could the boy have died accidentally? You mentioned they'd been fishing."

"The area wasn't particularly rugged or dangerous. No swamps, caves or quicksand. It was summertime, so the stream was only a few inches deep. There haven't been any bears or other really dangerous animals in those mountains for fifty years. And if he did meet with an accident, there's still that question: Why wasn't his body discovered?"

"Okay," he said with a sigh. "I give up."

"You mentioned four possibilities," she reminded him. "I heard only three."

"It's too foolish to discuss. The boy knew he was going to be punished for hurting his sister, so he got scared and ran away."

"A seven-year-old child can barely lace his shoes. He's as dependent as a kitten before it's weaned. He may bluff at running away from home the same way he may threaten to hold his breath. He simply can't do either." She added with a smile, "If it's any consolation, the police weren't above exploring the theory. It was like all the others, a blank wall. Twenty years later, we're facing that same blank wall. Was Timothy Owen kidnaped? Was he murdered? Or did the earth open and swallow him up? Nobody knows."

"Somebody knows," he said stubbornly. "Somebody just won't tell."

"Won't—or can't. Father Time has pruned the cast of characters a bit. James Clark Owen is dead. A heart attack a few years after

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the tragedy. Elinor Owen went off her rocker. She'll be in an institution for the rest of her life. The only witness left—if you can call any of them witnesses—is the servant, Yakel. The family discharged him after the tragedy, and I don't believe he's been sober since."

"How about the little girl, Gena?"

"She's a big girl now. Still single at twenty-five. By choice, I presume, since with her looks and her money, she can't have lacked for offers. She goes through men the way I go through nylons. Wear 'em once and throw the remains away. The difference is that it bothers me."

At her apartment, Libby invited him in for coffee. He declined, pleading fatigue, and made a date to play tennis the following morning. Driving home, he could not remember if he had kissed Libby good night. He had no trouble remembering he had kissed Gena Owen, however . . .

He left late, shaved leisurely and was dawdling over breakfast when the doorbell chimed. Saturday was the day when door-to-door solicitors descended en masse upon anyone unlucky enough to be home. Reluctantly, Wilson opened the door. And, to his great astonishment, saw Gena Owen standing there.

"Hello," she said shyly. "Remember me?"

His heart began to beat faster. "You bet I do. Won't you come in?"

She entered with a certain diffidence, watching him warily, like a bird poised for flight. "I suppose I should have phoned first, but I wanted to see you." She was dressed demurely in a suit of white linen, gloves and a broad-brimmed hat. Her face was scrubbed and nearly devoid of makeup, and she resembled not at all the vixen of the previous evening.

"I wanted to see you again, too," he told her. "Can I interest you in some coffee?"

"I can't stay. I only came by to apologize for last night. I behaved very badly and I hope you'll forgive me."

He smiled. "I must have had too much to drink. I don't recall a thing. Now will you take that coffee?"

"I don't understand why you're being so kind. I don't deserve it."

"Wouldn't it be a terrible world if we got what we deserve? Cream and sugar?"

"I take it black." She accepted the cup but didn't drink from it. "Isn't it a terrible world, really?"

"The sun is shining, the birds are singing and the coffee—even if I do say so—is excellent. What more can you ask for?"

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Her lips curved in an unwilling smile. "You're just as I remembered, a parfit gentil knight. You make me wish I could say that the damsel you rescued last night wasn't really me. But I can't. The only difference is that I've never felt the need to apologize for her before. Why do you suppose that is?"

"Maybe because we're meant to be friends, Gena."

She looked startled. "Then you know who I am."

"I figured it out later. Do you mind?"

"Oh, it doesn't matter, I guess." Her violet eyes were fixed unseeingly on the coffee cup. "I really have to run along."

"When will I see you again?"

"I don't think you will," she said slowly. "I don't think you should."

"I disagree. I don't pretend to understand these things, but I've got a strange feeling about you and me. That we were meant to meet. I've never felt this way about anybody before." He took her hands and was surprised to find that they were trembling. "Am I talking nonsense—or do you feel the same way?"

"You don't know the first thing about me. And you wouldn't like me if you did."

"That isn't answering my question."

"Oh, damn!" she whispered helplessly. "Of course I feel the same way, or I wouldn't have thumbed through half the Wilsons in the phone book or driven fifty miles to see you again. But it won't last!"

"How do you know without trying?"

"Because I know myself. I'm doomed, Rob. I destroy everything and everybody I touch. I'll destroy you if you let me."

"My," he said lightly, "you're an awfully little girl to wield such terrible power."

"Let me go. Make me go. If you don't, God only knows what'll happen to you."

"Didn't I tell you? I'm from Missouri. I have to be shown."

An expression of resignation crossed her face. "Just remember that I tried to warn you and you wouldn't listen." She removed her hat and shook her head so that the bronze hair swirled like the mane of some great tawny cat. "You're the boss, Rob."

"In that case, here are my orders. You're going to have lunch with me. Also dinner. Above all, you're going to have fun. If you're bound to destroy me, at least let it be with a smile."

He telephoned Libby to break their date for tennis. She was disappointed, but accepted his excuse graciously. "Well, if Space Systems can't get along without their fair-haired boy even on a

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Saturday, I'll have to grin and bear it. How about later?"

"Better not count on it. This project is likely to keep me tied up for some time."

Gena was listening to the conversation. When he hung up, she said, "See how it begins? Already, I've made you a liar."

Before a week passed, Robert Wilson admitted to himself that she had indeed transformed him. They dated steadily. His work had always been paramount in his life. Now the days spent in the lab were made endurable by the knowledge that, at their close, he would see her again.

Their backgrounds could hardly have been more dissimilar, yet he was amazed to discover how much they had in common. They both enjoyed swimming and tennis as much as they detested bridge and bowling. She had remodeled the master bedroom of the old home into an airy studio, and its walls were hung with her paintings.

"It's the only creative thing I do," she explained. "Most of my life is so utterly phony. Like a lot of people's, I guess. But when I paint—well, I can get to the truth of things. With a brush in my hand, I seem to be able to see more, understand more, than I can at any other time."

"That can be dangerous," he said, indicating a portrait whose grotesque features were dominated by three huge staring eyes. "If I were that fellow, I'd sue you."

"I've never used a model. I've never wanted to. Until now." She grinned impishly. "I'm doing an oil of you."

"And have me look like him? Let's not spoil a beautiful friendship."

"For you, I'm turning over a whole new leaf. Just a sweet old-fashioned portrait of a sweet old-fashioned boy. Something nice to remember you by."

"Sounds as if you plan to get rid of me."

"Planned obsolescence is the American way," she said lightly. "Why fight it? Enjoy it while it lasts. There's always next year's model."

Despite her surface cynicism, Gena was as much an idealist as he. The world might consider her a hoyden; Wilson found her completely virginal. She drew an invisible line which he did not attempt to cross. He did not wish to cross it, sensing that premature passion would not strengthen the bond between them, but destroy it. He was content to be her suitor, nothing more.

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For the most part, Gena appeared equally content. Occasionally, though, a mood of somber despair settled about her, and she would turn on him savagely. At those times, neither his soothing nor his silence pacified her. The storms usually lasted an hour or so, sometimes a full day, seldom longer. Afterward, she was inevitably contrite, filled with self-contempt. Following one particularly bitter outburst, she admitted that she had destroyed his unfinished portrait.

"I ripped it up," she said sheepishly. "I didn't like it at all. It wasn't you." But he suspected the opposite and that she had chosen to vent her violent emotions on the canvas rather than on the model. "Maybe I'll try again some day."

Yet the good times far outweighed the bad. Gena was the most exciting creature he had ever known. When she wondered why he put up with her, he replied, "Loving you is like living on the crest of a volcano. It's never dull—and you're willing to take an occasional eruption for the sake of the view."

On the Sunday that he asked her to marry him, they went on a picnic. The beach was foggy; he thoughtlessly suggested the mountains instead. Her face froze, an expression he had learned to recognize. This time the explosion did not come.

"I'd rather not," she said quietly. "I haven't been to the mountains in years."

They found a secluded grassy corner of Griffith Park, and there, stretched out on a blanket with his head pillowed in her lap, Wilson proposed.

Her answer was prompt and surprising. "No, Rob. I won't marry you."

"Why not? Is it because I'm losing my hair? I can always buy a toupee. Otherwise, I can't think of a reason, since you're obviously mad about me." She didn't smile, so he said seriously, "I'm not wrong about that, am I?"

"You mean more to me than any man ever has," she admitted. "But love and marriage—that's for people who deserve to be happy. I don't have that right. Please don't ask me why. Just accept it as the truth and let it go at that."

He sat up to face her. "Damned if I will. You seem to have some weird idea that you're doomed to burn in hell and that there's nothing you or anybody else can do about it."

"Don't you believe in hell?"

"Believe in me," he urged. "Together, we can lick anything."

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"I do believe in you, but it's too late."

"I've told you a little bit about my folks. Simple farm people, the hardworking Bible-reading salt of the earth. They weren't always that way. When he was a young man, Pop was just a shiftless migrant, dragging Mom and me from one harvest to the next, blowing every cent he made on liquor. Then I got hurt, and they didn't think I'd live. That's when Pop changed. 'God gave me another chance,' he'll tell you. I don't imagine that it was easy or that it happened overnight. The point is that it *did* happen."

She was silent for a while. "I've met your family—at least in a way. I suppose it's time you met mine."

The sanitarium was named Asilomundo which translated roughly as "refuge from the world," and was located in a tranquil corner of the San Fernando Valley. A private road, lined with tall eucalyptus trees, led to a white colonial mansion set amid several acres of green lawn. Nearby were a few pleasant bungalows. It might have been an exceptionally well-kept country club—if one ignored the formidable fence and the uniformed man at the gates.

Gena signed the visitors' book for both of them. As they drove the short distance to the parking area, she said, "All this security claptrap is mainly to impress relatives. The people here—you couldn't force most of them to leave at the point of a gun."

"It is a beautiful spot."

"Most cemeteries are."

She left him to wait in the lounge of the main building. It was a charming pastel room, with comfortable chairs arranged to allow semi-private conversations. A number of other men and women were there, chatting or playing cards or simply sitting in companionable silence.

Gena returned shortly with a plump matron she introduced as Mrs. Campbell. "Mother's working in the garden. We can see her there."

Behind the house was a vast sunken garden. The gravel paths, lined with privet hedges, led like spokes of a wheel to a sundial at its hub. At first glance, the garden appeared to be empty. A moment later, Wilson spied the slender figure of a woman kneeling among a miniature forest of tree roses. She wore slacks and a ruffled blouse; a broad-brimmed sun hat obscured her face. Assiduously cultivating the soil, she did not notice their approach.

The matron called cheerily, "Mrs. Owen! Look who's here!"

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Elinor Owen's face had not aged commensurate with her years, which were twice Gena's. Her skin was unlined, her hair untouched with gray.

She rose gracefully, smiling. "Sarah Jeanne!" she said with obvious pleasure. "I didn't know you were coming."

Gena accepted her embrace with an odd reluctance. "How are you, Mother?"

"Just fine, of course." Elinor patted her daughter's shoulder in mild rebuke. "I wish you'd warned me. I hate to be caught in my working clothes. And my hair!"

Gena took her arm. "Mother, I brought along a friend I want you to meet. This is Robert Wilson."

Elinor Owen seemed to see him for the first time. Still smiling, she extended a gracious hand. "How do you do, Mr. . . ." Her voice died away. The color drained from her cheeks and her outstretched fingers began to tremble. "Timothy!" she whispered. "Timothy—you came back!"

Wilson didn't know how to reply. He glanced at Gena for a clue, but she was silent, her expression stony.

"I knew you'd come back." Elinor stroked his cheek lightly; her touch was like ice. "I've been waiting for you."

"Mrs. Owen, I'm afraid you're making a mistake. I'm not your son."

Slowly, her rapt expression faded, and he began to think that she believed him. "Why do you hate me?" she asked in a bewildered voice. "You're cruel, like him. You like to hurt me. But you're my son, too! I won't let him have you! I'll see you dead first!"

Without warning, she sprang at him, hands curved into claws. Mrs. Campbell seized her about the waist. "Now, let's take it easy, Mrs. Owen," she soothed.

Elinor screamed at him over the other woman's shoulder. "I love you as much as he does! He's lying when he says I don't! Timothy, you've got to believe me—it wasn't my fault! I couldn't help it! Oh, baby, please, please . . ." She began to sob as the matron half-led, half-carried her away.

In the silence that followed, Wilson could hear the drone of a bee as it reconnoitered the rosebush Elinor Owen had been tending.

At last, Gena said, "I suppose I should have warned you."

"Then you expected that to happen?"

"This time was worse than usual, that's all. Otherwise, it's the

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same old story. With women, she's normal enough. But nearly every man is Timothy to her. Extreme paranoia. There's no hope for her." She sank wearily onto the nearest marble bench. "And now what was that you were saying about wanting to marry me?"

"Gena, I knew your mother was committed to an institution. Your mother—not you. Paranoia isn't contagious. It isn't even hereditary."

"My father drove himself to death, practically committed suicide. My mother is insane. My brother . . ." She shivered, although the sun was hot. "We're a cursed family, Rob. I can't escape it."

He took her hands in his. "Stop babbling about curses. People are punished for their own sins, not someone else's."

"That's what I'm trying to tell you." Gena slowly turned her face to him, and never had he seen such anguish in a human being's eyes. "You see—I killed my brother."

(continued on page 107)

"Q"

DETECTIVERSE

CHANGE OF ADDRESS

by VIRGIL STRIEBY

A lazy bank robber was Marvin NcNash.
His note to the teller said, "Give me your cash."
He waits for the money, but waits while in jail.
One inconvenience of banking by mail.

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Let's talk about a title for this extremely sensitive and moving story. The author's original title was "Not Coping." We thought there might be a more evocative and provocative title hidden in the text of the story. First we considered "In Little Rivers" or possibly "Not His World." Then "Looking for Shadows" or perhaps "Chase Away the Shadows." Next, "Juice Out of Strawberries." Finally we chose

PLEASE, NO STRAWBERRIES

by HAYES WILSON

His mother had told him not to turn on the TV set; it would soon be time for him to go to school. She herself left well before it was light, and his present father, the man who now lived in their house, had gone to work at some hour in the night. His other father, the real one, was dead. The blood had run out of him in little rivers and they had come to take him away, never to return.

Sometimes he felt that his father, the first one, was watching from somewhere in the dark, even though he knew that life must run out with all that blood. It was something that could happen to you if you were not on the watch all the time. Guns, knives, probably lots of things could make that red liquid inside you move out.

Cautiously he moved toward the TV; cautiously he turned the knob. His mother, that tall woman who moved easily and sometimes threateningly through his nights and part of his days, would have no way to know that he had turned on the set. She was at work, and he was scared, scared of seeing his father again with the bright red blood running out. The new father meant nothing to him although the man laughed and talked with the big woman his mother.

It was she who took him on his first day to whatever school he was currently attending. He knew that many schools did not want him. He had heard them say that they could not cope. What was cope?

In class the teacher tried to persuade him to look at the board,

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to speak as the others spoke, to recite words, words, words. He wanted to run loose in the room, to yell, to keep on the move. Even in the bright classroom some shadow might emerge, might pursue him. Blood was inside everybody, every living creature, and if anything got to him—

He turned on the TV and watched intently as the light came on and then a man was talking about some foolishness, he did not know what. This picture meant nothing special to him although he could see the man hold something up, perhaps toothpaste, from the way he was showing his own teeth, very white in his pink face. The rest of the room was still dark; it was the quality he hated most about winter.

Would blood freeze, he wondered, if it ran out of you in winter? He went to the kitchen, walking warily along in the dark to examine the knife that lay near the top in a kitchen drawer.

Soon the school bus would come honking along. The driver always tooted this way in winter, and as he lived in the last house on the block he often waited until he heard the sound before he left the familiar dark for the alien outside. He was supposed to leave when the alarm went off. His mother had set it, but she could not know that he waited sometimes for the sound of the bus. Then he ran.

He turned the TV set off with a click before taking off for his place on the bus, hoping that no one started a fight this morning. Usually they rode through the gloomy streets to a far place without incident, arriving at the new school where he was perfectly sure they would soon tell his mother that they could not cope. No one ever explained cope to him.

He had had nothing to eat when he left; he did not want the bowl of cold cereal left out to feed his skinny frame. At noon he would have the hot lunch, even if he had spent the morning evading any attempts to get him to say what the teacher wanted, even if he had run around the room looking for shadows and blood, but keeping to himself what moved him.

At noon the teacher would escort all of them to the lunchroom where other women would serve their plates, dolloping out mashed potatoes, meat, and always some green stuff. The teacher had tried to tell them that green stuff was good for them, but he had imitated the others. When the green was brocco—whatever the name was—they all pushed it aside, even the kids whose parents had come with money to pay for them to eat. Kids did not like brocco—whatever, and he was a kid, even though he was one with whom the school

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could not cope.

About strawberries he was uncertain. Last year at his school of that time some kids had eaten strawberries; some had pushed them off and had eaten the cake underneath. He considered the red a bit like blood, especially where the juice ran. It was not strawberry time in winter though, and maybe this school would not have short-cake.

He had once upset his plate with a clattering noise. Some kids had laughed, others had stared. It was over quickly, and fortunately nothing had spilled into his lap. Everyone ate rapidly and soon they were all getting their wraps and going outdoors.

He had a pencil to which he sometimes talked if no one were watching or listening. "You sharp like a knife," he told it lovingly, "and you mine."

To keep it sharp he went often to the sharpener, more often than the teacher considered necessary although she rarely mentioned it. Was she coping?

He had sat in various offices—doctors' offices, principals' offices, offices of people whose place in the scheme of his life he did not understand. He knew only that he wanted to escape, that out there somewhere some large fear was ready to swallow him and that he could only run or make loud noises to try to fend it off.

Some day, he was sure, the blood would run out of him just as it had run out of his father. Only by being continually alert could he hope to keep himself whole.

The teacher said, "Look at the board." The teacher said, "Listen."

Words, numbers, projects; they were not his world.

One time melted into another . . . He heard the man in the office say that there should be some special place for him. Or was it just that he could not cope? His mother wanted them to try again; they said no. They were not equipped at this school to handle cases like him; they did not know what was the matter.

He had his sharp pencil in a pocket. He took it out and ran it across his wrist until bright red blood appeared. Then he laughed, and the big woman his mother and the man behind the desk looked at him.

"Oh, son," she screamed, "you've hurt yourself," and the man behind the desk said, "We'll put something on it. It isn't deep."

They did not understand that sooner or later he would bleed as his father had bled, his real father, the one who had been taken away by strange men. The only thing he could control was his pencil,

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which was his little knife, his cutting instrument, his possession whatever school he was in.

He rose to accompany his mother, who had left her work early to come for him. Outside the sun was shining now as he skipped along, scarcely paying attention as he heard her say, "I'm sure you could learn if you'd only try. I'm sure. I am so helpless."

No, you aren't, he thought. You aren't helpless. You have the knife in the kitchen drawer. And I have my sharp pencil, whose point can bring blood like strawberries with a lot of juice.

That's why you went away for a while. Because of what you did with the knife. My grandmother took care of me but she couldn't chase away the shadows. I saw. I heard. That was some fight you had. You used that knife. I can use my pencil. I can bring blood. Like my father's blood. Blood running like juice out of strawberries.

He danced ahead of her, temporarily unafraid of lurking shadows anywhere, not thinking of the morning to come when she would be gone again and he would be alone in the wintry darkness, waiting for the bus to take him to another school perhaps, another school that could not cope, another school with words, and projects, and brocco-whatever, but please, no strawberries.

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a *NEW* short story by

GEOFFREY BUSH

A toast: To the old days, and to the five survivors of the Butlers Club — old Stanley (the President), old Murgatroyd (the Vice-President), old Phillips (the Treasurer), old Simpson, and old Bates . . . A devastating retrospective of the Golden Age of the Detective Story . . .

THE LAST MEETING OF THE BUTLERS CLUB

by GEOFFREY BUSH

The last meeting of the Butlers Club can hardly be said to have been a complete success. Meat loaf with ketchup—the only dish that agreed with both the members' elderly stomachs and their less elderly teeth—can scarcely be called the *pièce de résistance* of a gourmet dinner. Nor can the sudden and practically simultaneous deaths of all those who ate it, some 20 minutes later, be seen—except, perhaps, from the most judicious perspective—as a fitting climax.

Still, the festivities, while they lasted, were decidedly high-spirited. At about five o'clock—for the members adhered to the dinner hour that they had observed during their professional careers—the first guest arrived at the secluded but unobtrusively elegant section of London in which the Butlers Club has (or, one must now regretfully say, had) its permanent headquarters.

Assisted on one side by Morgan, the Club's resident Steward, and grasping the iron rail on his other side with a gnarled hand, the first arrival made his way up the front steps, through the hall, and into the lounge, where he undid the heavy overcoat he had bundled himself into on that cold Friday evening in January and sank hap-

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pily into the most comfortable of the five leather chairs in one corner of the large oak-paneled room—chairs discreetly redisposed to conceal the absence of a sixth, which had, alas, been recently removed. (There was a time, years ago, when the Club's membership numbered in the dozens, nay, in the scores.)

Soon afterward came the next guest. By five thirty all five members had tottered joyfully in, apart from old Phillips, who made his entrance in a wheelchair, and old Murgatroyd, whose habitual expression was one of alert anger. For the next half hour the gurgle of unblended Scotch whiskey filled the air—in the matter of the Club's liquid provisions, no expense was spared—together with the crackle of a small fire and the sound of squeaky but animated voices discoursing enthusiastically on their latest ailments.

At exactly six o'clock the figure of Morgan, the thin, deferential, middle-aged Steward—*young* Morgan, he was known as—appeared to announce that dinner was ready.

Nor does he deny that it was *his* dinner. He readily admits that he cooked it in the basement kitchen, he carried it upstairs, and he served it. He was, after all, the only servant on the premises—the Butlers Club's butler.

By a succession of gravity-defying movements old Stanley, the President, levered himself from his chair. Old Murgatroyd followed, looking about him with an angry scowl to see whether anyone was challenging his second, or Vice-Presidential, place. After him old Phillips went into motion, restraining himself out of a sense of decorum, since he was naturally the swiftest, by reason of his wheelchair. And one by one the five surviving members of the Butlers Club trooped and stumbled to their last repast.

"Very tasty," old Phillips remarked, and shoveled in another mouthful.

It was generally agreed that old Phillips, being on wheels, was permitted to eat the main course with a spoon. There had never been an agreement, however, that old Murgatroyd was. He had simply begun to, angrily, three years ago.

"Tangier than last year," old Simpson agreed in a quavering voice.

The section of meat loaf he had been conveying to his mouth slipped off his trembling fork and fell with a plop into his ketchup. Poor old Simpson, someone had said earlier in a loud and carrying tone—probably old Phillips, a keen-eyed observer—looked shakier than ever. Undeterred, old Simpson commenced new maneuvers with his fork.

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By this time the slender and retiring hand of young Morgan had filled the wine glasses from a bottle with a label almost as faded and venerable as the diners.

"Gentlemen," the President announced at the head of the table, "a toast."

There was a general clatter of silverware being lowered—or, in the case of poor old Simpson, dropped—and glasses being raised.

"To the old days!"

"To the old days!" repeated a surprisingly strong chorus of reedy voices.

Swallows were swallowed, glasses were set down, lips were smacked.

"Good stuff," old Phillips stated from his wheelchair.

"Very good," old Simpson echoed waveringly, still absorbed in the process of putting down his glass.

"Yours?" inquired old Bates, halfway down the table, looking up at the President. Thanks to an unfortunate malady with a Latin name, old Bates was unable to hold his head more than two or three inches above his plate, from which position, although it was convenient for eating, he had to peer up and sideways at whomever he was addressing.

"Bequeathed to me," the President replied, "by my old master." And for an instant an extra bit of light seemed to dance in his sparkling old eyes.

"To his old master!" old Phillips said, raising his glass.

"To *all* our old masters," old Murgatroyd amended, in a tone that would have been taken as bad-tempered from anyone else.

More swallows. Glasses put down again. And for a moment, for the space of an old heartbeat, an odd sense of something in the air—something like a roar of laughter—about to explode. But kept back, with difficulty, as the five members returned to their dinner. And young Morgan began deftly to refill their glasses.

"Don't suppose," old Bates observed, peering up in his sideways fashion, "they ever thought we'd be enjoying ourselves like this."

"Never *dreamed* it," old Murgatroyd corrected.

"Poor fellows," old Phillips said. And there was another beat of bursting silence, of barely suppressed hilarity, as each pair of ancient eyes looked into another pair, moved on, and gleefully met the next.

Had someone tittered? Old Murgatroyd, the Club crosspatch? Quickly, before anything unseemly could take place at the dinner

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table, the President looked up and down its shimmering white length. "More meat loaf?" he asked.

Old Bates, his chin down to his chest, struggled to his feet. "Tell young—young what's-his-name"—for it is a curious fact that the members of the Butlers Club were seldom able to remember the name of their own butler, though he had been with them for 20 years—"to bring brandy and cigars to the lounge."

Which was done. And after young Morgan had been casually dismissed, the members found themselves, agreeably full, reinstalled in their leather chairs, except for old Phillips, who retained his private, movable accommodations—though a leather chair was always ready for him, in case he should undergo a miraculous recovery—puffing thick cigars and sipping antique brandy. Plus, for the President and old Murgatroyd, decaffeinated coffee.

"Good meeting," old Simpson declared.

"Excellent," old Phillips agreed.

"So far," old Murgatroyd added, visibly mellowed, with only an undertone of his customary rage.

"Any business?" old Bates asked, his cigar held at a careful distance from his face, which was bobbing close to his lap.

"Not that I know of," the President answered.

"What about the finances?" old Murgatroyd demanded, irascibility boiling nearer to the surface.

"In splendid shape," said old Phillips, who was the Treasurer.

"Investments?"

"Doing well," old Phillips replied. "Sold a block of property in the West End."

"Why?"

"Advised to. By our brokers."

"What did we buy?"

"Saudi Arabia."

"What?"

"Large tract in Saudi Arabia."

"Why did we do that?"

"Said to have oil in it. Seemed like a good idea."

"Hmm," old Murgatroyd said, temporarily appeased.

There was a satisfied pause.

"Remarkable what can be done," old Bates said, looking about the handsome room with a sly, sideways grin, like an ancient Richard III, "with a few modest bequests. A pair of cuff links here. A hundred pounds there. An old family painting. An acre or two of the family

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land. A few shares of the family business. Put together, by humble fellows like us, and allowed to grow."

"Astonishing," old Phillips said.

"Sobering," the President said, gazing at the end of his cigar.

"And so simple, really," old Bates said.

This time the silence was almost solemn.

"Not many fellows like us left," old Murgatroyd observed.

"Young what's-his-name, I suppose," old Phillips said, waving his cigar toward the door through which young Morgan had departed.

"But not like *us*."

"Think he should have a raise?" old Bates said.

"Who?" old Murgatroyd said.

"Young Morgan?"

"What for? Hasn't complained, has he?"

"Odd chap," the President remarked. "Never complains about anything."

"What's he got to complain about?" old Murgatroyd asked. "He's the Steward, isn't he?"

Old Simpson lifted a trembling finger. "Cold toilet."

"Eh?" the President said.

"Toilet," old Simpson explained. "Cold."

"Cold?"

"When you sit down on it."

"What are you doing sitting down on young Morgan's toilet?"

"He doesn't mean young Morgan's toilet," old Phillips said. "He means ours."

"Electrically heated," old Simpson said.

"He means," old Phillips said, "he wants an electrically heated toilet seat."

"I'll see what I can do," the President promised.

"Why shouldn't a fellow have an electrically heated toilet seat?" old Bates said. "In his own club? After he's gone through what we've gone through?" And in his single visible eye, peering up and askance, was a gleam of triumphant mirth.

"I'll say," old Phillips exclaimed. And blew out an explosive puff of smoke.

"Ha!" old Murgatroyd ejaculated.

It was the President, drawing on his cigar, his lips on either side of it elevated in what those who knew him could tell was Presidential levity—it was he who was the first to give way. "I shall never forget—" he began, and the others understood that the time had come,

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at last, to indulge themselves in the greatest pleasure of their annual meetings. An hour or two of reminiscences. "I shall never forget the look on my mistress' face, as she stood in the dock in Old Bailey, and the Judge handed down his sentence."

"What was it?" old Phillips asked, settling back in his wheelchair.

"Twenty years, poor lady. Though it was later much reduced, for good behavior."

"No, no," old Phillips said. "What was the look on her face?"

"Incredulity," the President said, with a faraway look on his own round pink face. "That such a thing should be happening to her."

"But it was," old Phillips said helpfully.

"Yes." The President drew again on his cigar. He tapped the ash from it. "Perhaps you have forgotten the details." No one there had forgotten the details, except old Simpson. They had heard the details annually for more than 30 years, but they were glad to hear the details once more, provided their own turns would come soon. "On the night in question, that resulted in my lady's tragic appearance in the dock six months later, my master was sleeping in the summerhouse."

"Why?" old Simpson asked.

"Why what?"

"Why was he sleeping in the summerhouse? Wasn't it winter time?"

"I forget," the President said. "There was some adequate explanation given at the time. It was the sort of thing often done by the landed gentry of that period. In any event," he went on, a trifle testily, "it was not relevant to the case."

"Oh."

"What *was* relevant, however, was that at some time during the night it began to snow."

"Snow," old Simpson repeated attentively.

"The next morning he was discovered. Dead. By the parlormaid who had gone to change the sheets."

"Change the sheets?"

"The sheets of his bed," the President explained, a shade impatiently, "were changed daily. Whether he slept in the summerhouse or the main house."

"Ah."

"There were two sets of footprints in the snow."

"Two sets of footprints." Old Simpson enumerated them on his first two fingers.

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"One set leading to the summerhouse, and the other back to the main house."

"What about hers?"

"Hers?"

"The parlormaid's?"

The President drew a deep breath.

"Hers do not count."

"Oh."

"The parlormaid is of no importance."

"Ah."

"The important fact is—*there was only one pair of feet large enough to have made those two sets of footprints.*"

With no change of expression on his round imperturbable countenance, the President regarded the polished black toe of one of his size-12 shoes.

Old Simpson leaned forward. "What happened?"

"The local bobby was about to take me off to the station house when a gentleman whom my master had invited to spend the weekend arrived in a small sports car. He was, he said in an aristocratic voice, an amateur detective who had had some success in America with apparently insoluble cases of this sort."

"Insoluble?"

"Precisely the question raised by the local bobby, who then outlined the evidence of the footprints in the snow. But the gentleman glanced at me and inquired whether I was concerned about getting my feet wet."

"Were you?"

"Certainly, I told him, but in the flurry of being arrested that morning I had been unable to find my galoshes. Whereupon he turned to the bobby and suggested in an amused, sardonic manner that it might be a mistake to arrest the most obvious suspect."

"Why?"

"Cases of this sort, the gentleman implied, were never obvious. It took a superior brain like his to solve a classic puzzle like this. He referred to the bobby as 'old thing.' Persuaded him to wait until Monday, pointing out that communications in this part of England were already paralyzed by the two-inch snowfall. And after a day and a half of whistling snatches of operatic music and quoting bits of Latin and looking at the feet of the neighbors, the local clergy, and the tramps of the vicinity, the gentleman announced that he'd found the guilty party."

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"And it wasn't you?"

"All I stood to gain, he explained, was a small pension. And a few bottles from the wine cellar. It was the person who'd been overlooked from the beginning—my mistress."

"But how could she have made those footprints?"

"By borrowing my galoshes."

"Whew." Old Simpson sat back, as relieved at the outcome as he had been the first time he had heard it, 33 years ago.

Old Bates shook his bobbing head in wonder. "Amazing piece of reasoning."

"Did she ever give them back?" old Simpson asked. "Your galoshes, I mean?"

"Claimed she never had them. Lucky for me the gentleman had been invited."

"Who was he?"

"Vance was his name," the President said gravely. "Philo Vance."

There was a respectful pause.

"Reminds me of the chap who solved my case," old Phillips said from his wheelchair. "Thorndyke. Dr. Thorndyke."

"Ah, yes," the President said, relighting his cigar. Now that he had finished his own narrative, he could afford to be a polite interlocutor.

"Scientific investigation was his line," old Phillips went on in his rich, bass voice, like a large invalided bullfrog. He took a sip of brandy. "No personality to speak of. Practically no first name. But a wonderful mind. Thorough. Methodical. Always picking up things, putting them in little envelopes, and looking at them through a microscope."

"And he played a part in your case?"

"Fortunately. For me." Old Phillips pointed dramatically at the floor. He made up for the immobility of his lower half by oratorical gestures.

"There," he said vibrantly, "was my master's body. Shot, in the library, with the fatal revolver lying beside him on the Oriental rug. And there"—he pointed in the opposite direction, which happened to be the ceiling—"was a house full of guests. Including his first wife, his daughter by his second wife, his aunt by his mother's third marriage, his niece by his sister's first marriage to his fourth cousin, and his son-in-law, a nervous chain smoker."

"A whole crowd of suspects, eh?"

"Too many for Scotland Yard. Call in Dr. Thorndyke, they agreed.

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And the first thing he said, when he made his inconspicuous appearance, was, 'We can eliminate the servants.' "

"Reassuring."

"I don't mind telling you I was glad to hear it. 'They are only receiving a few insignificant bequests,' he said, 'in the form of old family portraits.' Then he said he was going to examine the revolver in his laboratory, to see if there were any fingerprints." Old Phillips paused rhetorically. "Sure enough, there were."

"Whose?" asked the President, who knew quite well.

"Mine."

"A disturbing development."

"Bit of a facer for Dr. Thorndyke, too. 'Have you recently mailed a bulky parcel?' he asked me. 'As a matter of fact,' I answered, 'yesterday I posted my master's stuffed rhinoceros head to a dry-cleaning firm.' 'Was it possible to wrap it adequately with string?' 'No,' I said, 'it wasn't. I had to use a roll of sticky tape.' 'How did you know that?' the Scotland Yard man asked, perplexed. 'I fear,' Dr. Thorndyke replied, 'that this case is less simple than it may have at first appeared.'

"The industrious fellow spent the next three days with his fingerprint powder and magnifying glass before he turned to the son-in-law and said quietly, 'When did you ask Phillips the butler to light your cigarette with your silver cigarette lighter?' Baffled looks on the faces of the other guests, assembled in the library. On mine, as well. 'Why,' stammered the son-in-law, 'I may have done so on the day I sprained my wrist while getting out of the bathtub, making it inconvenient for me to operate my cigarette lighter myself, a few hours before my father-in-law was shot.' Bewildered gasps.

" 'If indeed you did suffer such an improbable accident,' Dr. Thorndyke said. 'If, instead, it was not part of your carefully conceived plan to gain control of the family fortune by shooting your father-in-law with a revolver to which you then *transferred Phillips the butler's fingerprints from your cigarette lighter by means of adhesive package-sealing tape.*' "

Old Simpson whistled.

Old Bates drew an admiring breath.

"Astounding bit of deduction," the President said.

Old Phillips, sitting back in his wheelchair, observed with gratification the effect he had created in his audience.

"Almost as good as my case," old Murgatroyd said irritably.

"Almost?" Old Phillips raised his eyebrows good-naturedly.

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But old Murgatroyd was too engrossed to notice. "Imagine," he began, clenching his bony hands on the arms of his leather chair, "my master and me, alone in the billiard room. With the door open. And with the sworn testimony of three independent witnesses, guests at the house party, that no one else had passed through that door."

"Locked room, as it were, eh?" old Phillips said agreeably. "But with an open door?"

"Imagine the sound of an agitated cry. Of a body falling. Imagine, immediately thereafter, my master's twin brother, recently returned from a visit to Australia to take charge of the family's flourishing umbrella-stand factory, rushing into the room to discover my master dead on the floor, of a gaping wound. While I stood over him clasping the hilt of the angular medieval knife that ordinarily hung on the wall."

Old Bates peered up and sideways.

"Good heavens," old Phillips said.

Old Murgatroyd nodded grimly. "A difficult situation."

Old Simpson, who had been sitting with his mouth open, closed it. And opened it again. "What did you say?"

"On the spur of the moment I could not think of anything suitable to say."

Old Phillips clicked his tongue. "Open-and-shut case."

"So it appeared. Until Lord Peter entered it."

"*The* Lord Peter?"

"The Lord Peter." Old Murgatroyd's bony face softened. "Charming man. Made one conscious that one belonged to the lower orders, but that one *liked* it. 'Oh, no,' he said to the Inspector, when he'd assembled us all in the billiard room to reconstruct the crime, 'it's not the butler.' 'Not the butler, Wimsey?' the Inspector said disbelievingly. 'Standing over the body? With the knife in his hand?' 'I fancy you'll find,' Lord Peter said, in his kind, boyish, impulsive way, 'that young what's-his-name—'

" 'Murgatroyd?' the Inspector supplied. 'That young Murgatroyd,' Lord Peter went on, 'who, by the way, is only gettin' a modest annuity and two or three acres of the family estate, was simply pullin' the knife out of the wound to see what could be done for his master.' To which I gratefully agreed. And my master's attractive daughter, whom I'd known since she was a baby, gave my hand a little squeeze.

"The Inspector looked dumfounded. 'But this *is* the knife that

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made the wound?' 'Oh, yes,' Lord Peter said, 'no doubt about that.' 'And nothing went through that door, according to three independent witnesses who were sitting within six feet of it?' 'Nothing,' Lord Peter said, 'human.' The Inspector turned pale. 'Good God. Something—supernatural?' 'More interestin' than that,' Lord Peter said, and turned carelessly to face my master's twin brother.

" 'Delightful summer we've been havin,' isn't it?' 'Unusually pleasant,' the twin brother agreed, at a loss. 'Not for someone, though, who's borrowed heavily in the City,' Lord Peter went on remorselessly, 'on the strength of an increased demand for umbrella stands.' 'But—' the twin brother began. 'I suppose as soon as you saw this curiously shaped knife you knew it could be used in a rather special way.' 'Special way?' 'Thrown around a corner—through an open door—past three independent witnesses—as *an Australian boomerang.*'

"The others exclaimed with mingled horror and relief, while the twin brother stood there speechless, and the Inspector clapped the handcuffs on his wrists. 'But how could you be so sure,' the Inspector said, 'that it wasn't Murgatroyd?' 'Who?' Lord Peter asked, with that endearing forgetfulness of his. 'Murgatroyd,' the Inspector said, 'the butler.' 'Oh, the butler. It always looks as if it's the butler.' There was a mischievous twinkle in Lord Peter's eye. 'It looks as if it *must* be the butler, on Friday, when the body's discovered. But by Sunday night it always turns out it isn't.'

"Then he stopped, and grew serious. 'Wouldn't be fair, really, would it, if it was? If you couldn't count on spendin' the weekend explorin' the case? And analyzin' the problem? And usin' your intelligence? And findin' someone else?' "

This time no one spoke. Old Simpson stared into the dying fire. The President drew on what was left of his cigar, looked at it, and stubbed it out. Old Phillips sighed.

"Reggie Fortune was the one who solved my case," old Simpson said tremulously. "Plump chap. Relied on his intuition. Kept saying, 'Oh, my aunt!' "

"They brought Max Carrados into my case," old Bates said wistfully. "Blind fellow. Used his other phenomenally developed senses."

"Remember Trent?" the President asked. "Father Brown? Inspector French? Albert Campion, obscurely related to royalty?" He surveyed the room, as if searching in the deepening shadows for a sixth chair, and a seventh, and an eighth, which were no longer there. "All the others?"

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One nostalgic old voice followed another.

"Working out their timetables?"

"Drawing their diagrams of the bedrooms?"

"Interrogating the guests?"

"Hypothesizing?"

"Investigating?"

"Reasoning?"

"Never resting until they'd proved it wasn't the butler?"

"The obvious suspect?"

"But someone else?"

"Until they'd discarded the simple solution?"

"And thought up another?"

"That was *really complicated?*"

Old Phillips snorted. Old Simpson emitted a quavering guffaw. Old Bates, his head bobbing faster, began to chuckle. The President allowed his round cherubic face to break into a very slow, very broad smile.

"Silly asses," he said.

Old Murgatroyd was the only one who sat with a preoccupied expression on his bony, ill-natured features. "I say," he remarked peevishly, "do any of you chaps think there was something odd about the meat loaf?"

Three-quarters of an hour later, young Morgan testified that he found, when he entered the room to ask if anything more was required of him, that the last five members of the Butlers Club had gone to their rewards. To judge from their attitudes, they had passed their final moments endeavoring to reach either the bell or—for both were located on the same sideboard—the brandy bottle.

Whatever contribution they could have made to our knowledge of the wave of weekend country-house murders that swept over England in the '20's and '30's has gone with them. The mystifying circumstances of their own deaths, however, may soon be solved. Young Morgan was the first to come under suspicion, when it was discovered that a quart of liquid drain cleaner had been mixed into the meat loaf. But that explanation was quickly dismissed.

Scotland Yard, with the help of a number of amateur experts, is now working on the theory that the drain cleaner was frozen into tiny ice pellets, which, during one of his absences from the kitchen, were shot through the bars of the basement window, perhaps by a South American blowpipe, and which then melted, leaving no trace

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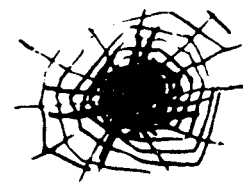
of the ingenious murder method, while the empty bottle of drain cleaner was tossed into the kitchen waste receptacle to confuse the authorities.

A distant cousin of old Bates, they point out, has just returned from a trip to the Amazon. And young Morgan stands to gain nothing from the evening's extraordinary events, according to the Club's constitution, but a few wine bottles, cuff links, paintings, stock shares, and real-estate holdings.



CRIME CANAPÉ

Tolstoy's *The Brothers Karamazov*, written in the nineteenth century, is one of the world's great novels. But it may also be the first murder mystery on the grand scale, for its central storyline is: *Who Killed Papa Karamazov?* The three main suspects are his sons, the gambler Dmitri and the priest Aloyesha, and Smerdyakov, a combination handyman-servant in the old man's house. When a thousand pages later we learn that Smerdyakov is the murderer, after Tolstoy has expounded along the way on Love, Religion, and Money, isn't it rather safe to claim that one of the earliest staples of detective fiction originated with Tolstoy? To wit—"*The butler did it!*"

—MICHAEL AVALLONE

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DEPARTMENT OF THIRD STORIES

We've published stories about barkeeper-detectives, but at most only a few. The barkeeper-sleuth is still a rara avis—perhaps because in real life there aren't many barkeepers with "a natural detective talent." But Harvey was the exception—he was a combination behind-the-bar bloodhound and dying-message deducer. . .

THE LITERARY BOOKMAKER

by RUSSELL MARTIN

As soon as I saw Vogel walk into the bar I knew it meant trouble. Detective Sergeant Cyrus Vogel never comes into my tavern before eight in the evening unless it's a business call. I looked at my watch. It was just after four in the afternoon.

Of course, today could be the exception. It all depended on what he ordered to drink: if it was his usual, a screwdriver, there was no problem to solve. If it was something non-alcoholic—

"Orange juice, no ice," Vogel said, and ran a hand through his hair.

That meant he considered himself still to be on duty. And the only time he comes into Harvey's Place on duty is when he has a tough case to crack. And needs my help.

Oh, well. It might kill a little time to listen before the regulars started coming in about an hour from now. And we were the only two in the place. "Hard one, eh?" I asked sympathetically after I got Vogel his drink.

"You got it, Harv," he groaned, and gulped the orange juice thirstily. "One of those mob murders, we think."

"Those aren't usually tough," I pointed out, "just impossible. Everybody knows that when a mob figure is killed, it usually could have been any one of a hundred hoods in the city. And nobody ever investigates very closely. So why are you looking so sick, if it's one of those?"

"It isn't that at all, Harv," he said. "Look, would you do me a favor and act as a sounding board for me? If I go over the details

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with someone who's not involved in the case, maybe it'll help me get a new angle on it."

Or maybe I'll get one of my bright ideas and solve it for you, I thought. Having what some of my cop friends call a "natural detective talent" has earned me a few more regular customers around here, but it also makes it hard to say no when they ask me for help.

"Sure," I said. Good old Harv. "Shoot."

"Thanks," Vogel said. "The dead man is a medium-time bookie named Jean-Guy Beaugrand. French-Canadian. He used to be a member of the Montreal mob, but about five years ago he moved down here. He was one smart operator—all the cops knew what he was up to, but we never got enough evidence to put him in jail.

"He ran his bookmaking operation a few blocks from here, in the back of the bookstore where he worked as a clerk. He lived in a cheap little walkup apartment on the other side of town.

"That's where his girl friend found him yesterday morning, when she went up to his place. During the night someone had put a carving knife from Beaugrand's kitchen into his chest. So the questions are: who and why?

"Ordinarily we'd have had too little to go on—or rather too much. With known underworld associates, who can tell which were the friends and which were the enemies?

"Except that this time we got a couple of breaks. The first was that Beaugrand's killer didn't strike immediately. They apparently spent a few minutes talking before the actual murder—long enough for Beaugrand to guess what his killer was up to, grab a pen, and write something on a sheet of paper he had in front of him.

"That paper was a list, from the bookstore, of some books that had been shipped recently. Beaugrand seems to have pretended to be writing in an addition to the list, because all he put down was the title of a book and the name of its author."

"What was the book?"

"*Seize the Day,* by Saul Bellow," Vogel said very clearly.

"Strange book for a bookmaker to have heard of."

"Beaugrand was a strange character. He seemed to be the only member of the local mob who actually knew something about books and authors. We found out he actually got good marks at high school, back in Montreal, before he went into crime.

"Anyway, we checked on the book—and it seems that the bookstore hasn't had it in stock for years. We figure that Beaugrand intended to use it as a clue to his killer's identity."

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"A dying message," I muttered. "What's the second of those breaks you mentioned?"

"The only way to reach the second floor of the apartment building—the floor Beaugrand's room was on—is by an outside staircase. Remember that snowfall we got night before last?"

"Sure. What has that—oh, I see."

"Right. If the killer had come from outside the building—from anywhere but the second floor—he would have left footprints in the snow on the outside stairs. And nobody did before the girl friend came up, and the coroner says Beaugrand was dead long before she got there."

"Which limits your suspects to how many?"

"Four. There are six rooms—11 through 16—on the second floor. Beaugrand was in apartment 11. Number 12 is vacant.

"The guy in 13 is a milquetoast-type clerk named Jasper Woods. He's fortyish, baldish, no friends, nothing. The Complete Nonentity. But that doesn't mean he couldn't have been mixed up with Beaugrand somehow.

"Number 14 is a longshoreman named Cam Dickson. The type that opens beer bottles with his teeth—you know? In a way he's our number one suspect, because he's known to have been associated with illegal gambling before. But he says he doesn't know anything about Beaugrand—which is what they all tell us—and that he frankly couldn't care less. Unless we find some evidence, what can we do?

"The tenant in 15 is a receptionist named Barbara Paulton. She lives alone, too. Sometimes she has visitors over—she's not as much of a zero as Woods—but nobody on the night in question. She says she went to bed and slept all night without seeing or hearing anything unusual—and again, that's the story all of them tell.

"And finally, in room 16, we have a waiter in a restaurant near here. The guy is named Tobias Culpepper. There's a hint of something to do with drugs in his past, but nothing that ties him to the dead man."

"What do you think was the motive for the crime?"

"Our theory is that the killer was a client of Beaugrand's who found he—or she—had lost more than was financially acceptable. When the killer visited Beaugrand in his apartment to see if he could get back some of what he had lost, he found he couldn't, lost his head, and let Beaugrand have it. What do you think, Harv?"

"The key to it is that dying message," I said. I hoped I could clear

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this up before the evening customers started to come in, but the way things were going, I wasn't at all confident. "*Seize the Day,* eh?"

"By Saul Bellow," Vogel agreed gravely. "There you have it. What was Beaugrand trying to tell us?"

"*Seize the Day*," I muttered. "Jasper Woods, a clerk. Cam Dickson, a longshoreman. Barbara Paulton, a receptionist. Tobias Culpepper, a waiter." I tried to think for a minute, while Vogel finished his orange juice.

Then I had it.

"Care for a drink with a little more punch to it?" I asked. "You might want to celebrate my solving another one."

Vogel leaned forward expectantly. "Let's have it."

I took a pen and a napkin and scribbled a word. "Read that," I said.

"*Seize*," Vogel said. "So? That's part of the dying message. I don't see—"

"You will. Just listen. To you, and to me, that word means the English *seize*—to grab, to take hold of. But Beaugrand was a *French-Canadian*, and to someone whose mother tongue is French, those five letters—s-e-i-z-e—mean something different. They spell out *seize,* the French word for—sixteen."

"Culpepper," Vogel said suddenly.

"Right—room 16, Tobias Culpepper. The single word *seize* was all Beaugrand needed to implicate him, but he had to disguise it so as not to arouse Culpepper's suspicion. He looked down at the list of books, and inspiration was born."

"Well, I think you've done it again, Harv," Vogel said. "Sorry I can't take you up on that drink offer, but I'm still on duty—I want to go back and have a longer talk with Mr. Culpepper." He was still smiling as he strode out of the bar.

He didn't even say thank you, I thought, as another customer came in a few moments later.

Oh, damn. It was the Captain of the Fraud Division.

Still, unless he ordered something non-alcoholic—

"Ginger ale, Harv," he said.

Oh, well, here we go again . . .

"Q"

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a *NEW* short story by

PATRICIA HIGHSMITH

"That was the essence, and that was what he had been unable to take, or accept . . ." As one member of our readers' staff reported: "Unusual and scary. An ambitious attempt to explain something seemingly unexplainable." In other words, Patricia Highsmith at the top of her form, always trying to break through to the very heart and brain of mystery . . .

THINGS HAD GONE BADLY

by PATRICIA HIGHSMITH

This was the story in the newspapers, in the local paper and in *The New York Times*, and it merited about five lines in both:

> Robert Lottman, 25, a sculptor, confessed having killed his wife, Lee, 23, by blows about the head with a rolling pin in the kitchen of their home near Bloomington, Indiana. Their two-year-old daughter, Melinda, in the kitchen at the time, was unhurt in her crib when police arrived, after having been summoned by Lottman.

Robert Lottman went quietly into the hands of the police, then into a jail cell, his manner described by one journalist as "cool" and by another as "cold and indifferent."

The two-year-old Melinda was at once sent to her grandmother, Evelyn Watts, of Evanston, Illinois. Mrs. Watts expressed disbelief of her son-in-law's act. She had liked Robert Lottman, until now. She had been sure that he loved her daughter. She couldn't understand why the murder had happened. She had never seen Robert lose his temper. Robert didn't drink or take drugs. What had happened?

The psychiatrists—two—were asking the same questions in the

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Bloomington jail. They were not keenly interested, but a psychiatric questionnaire was a necessary formality.

"I don't know," Robert Lottman replied. "I loved her, yes. I loved her." He detested saying that to the officially engaged psychiatrists, but it seemed little to reveal, since why should he have married Lee if he hadn't loved her?

"You had quarrels?" said one psychiatrist. It was more a statement than a question. "Fights before?" That was a question.

"No, never," said Robert. He looked his interrogator in the eyes.

"Then why did you do this?" Long pause. "Sudden fit of temper?"

Robert remained silent, uncomfortable. He was thinking that he didn't have to answer, anyway. Since he had admitted striking the fatal blows, what did it matter if they had had a quarrel, if he had had a fit of temper, or not? "I was not angry," Robert said finally, hoping this would satisfy the two and that they would go away. He had been sitting on the hard chair for twenty minutes.

Now the dark-haired psychiatrist said to Robert, "You know, if you and your wife had been having a quarrel—about anything—it could be a manslaughter charge. Lighter than premeditated murder."

"Come on, Stanley, no one's bringing up premeditated in this—as yet. It's a household affair."

Robert wanted to switch them both off. He wagged his head, tired and bored. The psychiatrists might think that movement "evasive," he thought. Robert did not feel in the least evasive. He felt contemptuous of the two men before him, questioning him. Robert had pride. He was not going to tell them why he killed Lee. These two might never understand. They didn't look the types to take the time. Maybe he would write out why he had killed Lee. But write it for whom? Not the court, certainly. Maybe for himself only. Robert was a sculptor, not a writer, but he could make himself clear in words if he wanted to.

"We're trying to do the best for you before the—the—uh—trial," said one of the men.

"Sentence. Before the sentence," said the other.

The best for him? What did it matter? Robert said nothing.

"You don't care what kind of sentence they give you?" asked the dark-haired one.

"That's correct. I don't care."

"There wasn't another man in the picture?" asked the plump, baldish one, in a tone of hoping that there had been.

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"No. I've said that." How he had hoped for another man! "Isn't this enough? I don't know how I can tell you any more."

A minute later he was free, at least of those two. A prison guard came in and accompanied him back to his cell. Robert paid no attention to the guard. He had no intention of trying to escape out one of the doors, two of which gave onto a parking lot. The jail did not look grim or well-guarded, it was just a jail.

Robert's mind was on *another man*. There had not been another man. Funny, in a way, since Lee had been so fantastically popular when Robert had met her.

Back in his cell he was still thinking of that, Lee's popularity. She had been 20, going to art school in Chicago, when Robert met her. He had visited the Reinecker Art Institute in quest of a part-time job, two or three mornings a week, teaching sculpture. He had his own credentials from the Art Students' League in New York and from a Brooklyn academy, less well known, but he had a prize from that school, attested to by a certificate and a photograph of his work which had taken first prize. The Reinecker, however, had wanted a teacher for five mornings a week, and Robert had hesitated, said he would think it over. Nine to noon, five days a week. They would have taken Robert on, yes, and they hadn't thought it unusual that Robert wished to consider it for a few days. Robert had walked out of the superintendent's office and into the hall, down a short flight of stairs, and met Lee coming up the stairs.

He had not met her in the usual sense, and she had been with two young men, one on either side of her, all three talking, as Robert remembered it, but his eyes had met Lee's eyes for an instant. Robert could still see it as clearly as if it had been a color photograph that he carried with him. Lee was blonde, not very tall, and had blue eyes. She had been wearing beige trousers, like chino pants, a pale blue shirt or blouse.

Robert had turned and followed her. She had a smooth, oval face, a high forehead, round and rather bulging. The important thing were her eyes—intelligent, appraising, cool. Who wouldn't have followed those eyes, Robert wondered. As he had walked behind the trio in the corridor, Lee had looked back once at him, aware that he was following her. The two boys with her had eyes only for Lee, Robert remembered. Robert was to see plenty of this later. But Lee had stopped and turned, looking at him.

Robert had said, "Hello," like one stunned. Hadn't the other two fallen back a step, stunned also in the presence of love at first sight?

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Robert was not sure. He had managed to get out something, because he wanted her as a model, quite apart from the fact that he had fallen suddenly in love with her. "You're a student here?" Maybe he had said something like that. Anyway, Lee had said that she was not studying painting any longer and was intending to go to a photography school, somewhere else. Robert had whipped his little sketchbook from a back pocket, a pencil, had got Lee's name and address, and had given her his own. She had a telephone number. She lived with her mother in Evanston.

She had liked him, that was the important thing, enough to give him her name and address. And suddenly, too, she had been walking with him, back down the long cream-colored corridor with its closed doors on either side, bulletins and posters everywhere on the walls—and the other two young men had vanished, or were maybe standing in the corridor behind them, puzzled.

And then things had gone badly.

Robert was now sitting on his bed, thinking: *things had gone badly*. But he was thinking of two periods of time—just after he had met Lee and the past weeks. Between those times about three years had passed.

In the first bad or uncertain period, just after he met Lee, it had seemed to Robert that she was afraid of him. She refused to make dates with him, she wrote him an ambiguous note: did she want to see him again, or not? Robert lived just 30 miles or so from Evanston. One of the young men in whose company Robert had first seen Lee was still present and in full force. This Robert had discovered when he had his first date with Lee. She had had to ease the young man politely from her mother's house, and he had gone off with a smirk at Robert, as if to say, "You're wasting your time, fellow."

Robert and Lee had gone back to her mother's house after dinner (her mother was divorced), and Lee had shown him her drawings, some paintings that were not as good as her drawings, and her new photographic efforts. Robert was impressed. Many were portraits of people she knew, young and old. She had imagination and energy. The energy showed in Lee herself—a strong body neither slender nor sturdy but something in between, with a grace of movement. Above all, her energy showed in her enthusiasm for her work.

Robert had blurted out around midnight, "I *love* you—you know?" Then Lee had been silent, as if surprised (how could she be, when half a dozen men must be in love with her, Robert had thought), and then she had gone on putting away her photographs in their

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labeled folders and portfolios. He had not tried to take her hand or to kiss her.

And then silence—for two weeks, for a month. She was too busy to make dates, she said when he telephoned. And Robert recalled his friends' advice, with mingled gratefulness and annoyance: "Play it cool, Bob, and she'll come around to you." He was not the type to play it cool, but he had done his best, and Lee had come around, made dates with him, even said yes when he asked her to marry him. By then they had been to bed together several times in his studio. Robert was head over heels. He felt he had met a goddess. He did not care for the word goddess, but he didn't know what else to liken her to, because there was no other girl in the world like her.

The advice. Robert lit one of his remaining five cigarettes. *Advice* reminded him of his parents in New York. They had telephoned him yesterday, and he had been allowed to speak with both of them. "Is it true, Bobbie?" his mother had asked in a voice that pained Robert to remember. "We just can't believe it," his father had said in a heavy, hopeless tone. "We thought it was a mistake—of names, identity—" It wasn't a mistake, Robert had told him. Yes, he had done it. How could he explain on the telephone? Did it really matter if he explained it, much as he liked and loved his parents? Could they ever understand even if he wrote it out for them? "My life is finished," Robert had said at the end. The guard had beckoned to him then (even though his parents had been paying for the call), and Robert had told his father that he had to hang up.

If he were writing it—Robert was walking around his cell whose confinement and barred door did not bother him in the least now—he would say that Lee had become a different person. That was it, and Robert had realized that long ago, nearly two years ago. If he ever wrote anything about Lee and himself, he would have to say this from the start and emphatically. That was the essence, and that was what he had been unable to take, or accept, whatever you wanted to call it. *His fault.* Sure. Lee had the right to change, or maybe just to become herself.

When the baby was less than a year old, Robert had asked her if she wanted to divorce him.

"But why?" Lee had asked back. "What's wrong, Bob? Are you so unhappy?"

They hadn't made love for a month or more. Robert couldn't, and maybe Lee hadn't even noticed, absorbed as she was in Melinda. It

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wasn't the act or the pleasure of making love that was so important, meaning not even the absence of it was so important, but the fact that Lee had become another person with motherhood—formidable word—and with all the fussing around the house, which had begun early in their marriage. Gradually she had dropped her photography. The equipment in her darkroom had begun to gather dust before Melinda's birth, Robert remembered. They had got a mortgage on a pretty house, not too big or too small, outside the town where Robert had had his rented studio. There had been a period of shopping for furniture, curtains, buying a fridge and a stove, but Lee hadn't stopped. Then it had been slipcovers for the sofa and living-room armchairs, and Lee was good at the sewing machine. Then she had become pregnant. Nothing wrong with that, of course, and Robert had been as happy as she. Sunday afternoon dinners at her mother's, a bit boring but bearable, sometimes even cosy and reassuring.

Robert paused in front of the not very big mirror fastened to the wall above his basin. He saw that he was frowning. He rubbed his chin brusquely, barely met his own eyes. He was not interested in looking at himself. Rotten shave he had given himself that morning. What had he been thinking of then?

The magic just fell away, Robert thought. Would he write a sentence like that, if he were writing about himself and Lee?

Robert felt suddenly puzzled. How could anyone write something about anything, until it was clear in his own head? How could anyone put into words or phrases how much he had loved Lee? The clumsiness, the bluntness of certain pop-song lyrics came now to Robert . . . *the catch in my throat when we meet . . . when I look in your eyes, I want to die . . . the places we yee-eewst to go together* . . . Lee had liked pop music as background sometimes when she sewed, changed the baby, or gave her a bath. If only Lee had stopped doing little things, let him change the baby (he could), just dropped everything and got back to her own work!

Robert was working himself into a torment again. Absurd. Lee was dead and forever dead. What good did tension, even analysis, do now, really?

In the next seconds he was back to the present. His parents were coming to see him tomorrow. Lee's mother evidently did not wish to see him, and she had gone with Melinda to a sister's house somewhere in Illinois. Rather, she was going, after the funeral. The funeral was *today*. Robert realized that with only a mild shock; he

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had an impulse to look at his wristwatch, and didn't. He knew it was still before noon, because the guard had not brought his lunch tray. Funerals were always in the morning, weren't they?

Then for another few seconds Robert felt that he couldn't realize what he had done. That was almost comforting, like a pill he might have taken. He did realize that his life and his work, whatever he had wanted to do in life, was over, finished. He might as well be dead now, like Lee. But they weren't going to kill him, just sentence him and imprison him. That was worse. Think about that later. He was pushing his tongue against his left eyetooth, which was nicked from a football game, way back, when Robert had been 14 or 15. A vision of little white houses, blue sea behind them, came into his eyes. Greece. Robert had been to Greece when he was 20, pack on his back, sleeping on beaches and in pine woods, getting to know the land and the people. He had hoped to have enough money one day to buy a house on a Greek island, and to live there with Lee at least half of the year, the other half in America. He had never forgotten Greece or his dream of a house there. He and Lee had used to talk about it, now and then. Greek music.

Lee's music. Lee hadn't always played pop, either on the radio or on the record player. She had liked Mahler, oddly. Depressing sometimes to Robert, fear-making, unfathomable sometimes to him. Yet now the memory of the Mahler Sixth steadied him. He had come to a big decision about Lee while Mahler's Sixth Symphony played one afternoon. He had been working on a clay model of what he called "A Dreaming Woman," the woman not reclining but on her knees with arms raised as if half ambulant in her dream. He had gone to speak with Lee about his idea.

And what had she been doing? Putting adhesive paper down on some kitchen shelves, standing on a low formica stool. Robert proposed that she divorce him and marry Tony, the bachelor architect-carpenter who lived about eight miles away, the same fellow who had hung the shelf Lee was now busy with.

"Tony?"

Robert could still hear her voice and the astonishment in it. "He's in love with you," Robert had said. "Just too polite to do anything about it. You must know it yourself."

"Are you out of your mind, Bob?"

Robert remembered her eyes then, the same straight clear gaze at him, but what a different mind or brain behind those eyes!

The difference in her was affecting his work, at least affecting his

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sketches of Lee. He could not see her the same way as before, because she wasn't the same. His nearly life-size nudes of her, a couple of years old by then, thumbtacked to the walls of his workroom, had seemed to mock him: you can't do it again, they seemed to say. The drawings had spirit, enthusiasm, even genius. Whose genius, his or Lee's? Robert wasn't vain, it could be his or hers, and he preferred to think it both his and hers.

So Robert had turned himself to other themes, other women's figures, if he needed them, abstracts, nature forms. Lee had become "any woman," ordinary, pretty, but uninspired and uninspiring. Robert had managed a teaching job for three mornings a week in Chicago. They could have afforded a baby-sitter, a woman to do the housecleaning once or twice a week, but Lee seemed to enjoy these chores, and she said she didn't want anyone else in the house.

If Lee began to be the cliché, the woman-next-door, Tony Wagener was the archetype of the man-next-door (formerly the nice-boy-next-door) whom the average girl would be lucky to marry. He was healthy, attractive, good-futured, aged 25, and he couldn't take his eyes off Lee. Was it any wonder that a happy idea had crossed Robert's mind? Robert had thought it might work. He still loved Lee, even in a physical way, in fact, but the letdown—of his dream? No, because Lee *had* been the way he remembered her when he met her and when they had married, for a while. Witness his drawings! Witness his three statues of her, two small and one life-size! They were good, really good!

Therefore, Tony.

"Don't you like Tony?" Robert had asked on another occasion.

"Like him? I never think about him. Why should I? He brings us wood for the fireplace—because he doesn't need it." She had shrugged.

"It might be better. You might be happier. Tony would." Robert remembered he had laughed here.

Lee had still been puzzled. "*I* don't want Tony!" And what else had she said? Had she asked him if he was miserable with her, if he didn't love her any longer?

What would he have answered in that case?

It had crossed Robert's mind to run away, simply abandon Lee and the baby. He loved the baby, was rather in awe of it as his and Lee's creation, but he had still been able to envisage disappearing rather than—something worse. The something worse hadn't been definite in Robert's mind then, he had merely feared it.

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If he disappeared, Robert remembered thinking, mightn't things be better? Lee would land on her feet, if she fell at all. Tony would dance attendance and step in as soon as Lee let him, and why shouldn't she? Tony was serious about his architecture, had a degree from somewhere, and was going to climb in his profession. Robert could not imagine a more ardent suitor than Tony, if Tony were only given a chance. Tony had had a girl friend when Lee and Robert had moved into their house, but after three months or so (Tony had been doing some carpentry work for them, and had brought the girl once or twice), Tony had dropped her. Tony had fallen in love with Lee, that had been plain. Robert remembered mentioning it, early on, to Lee, and Lee had shrugged, uninterested.

Robert had been doing portraits, heads as he called them, for two people or clients in Bloomington, and for one in Chicago. They brought in money. Only middle-aged and well-to-do people could afford the luxury of having themselves or their wives cast in bronze at $3000 each. Robert had had to work in rather conventional style to get a likeness that pleased the client. He tried to be as free as he could in his style, but still it bored him.

Lee had begun to bore him. Incredible realization! One day he had driven back from a sitting in Chicago, nervous, unhappy, and he had said to Lee, "What if I just disappeared?"

She had turned from the stove where she was cooking something. "What do you mean?" Her smile was almost her former smile, amused, cool, showing rather pointed white teeth between her rouged lips. She wore white sneakers, a pair of girls' maroon corduroy jeans. She couldn't wear boys' trousers, because she had a waistline and hips, though she was not plump.

What had he replied? Robert tried to remember now, because it was important, because he had really been trying to make the right suggestion. "I don't see that you need me any more." Robert was sure he had said that. What else could he have said? "If I went away, I'd send you money to live on, you can be sure of that." Then he had blurted out the truth: "You're not the same girl as before. It's not your fault, I think. It's *my* fault. I should never have asked you to marry me. Somehow I'm destroying *you*. And this situation or whatever it is is bothering my work. It depresses me."

"But I *am* the same person. Sure I have to spend a lot of time now with Melinda, but I don't mind that. It's normal." And at that moment hadn't she run across the kitchen to stop Melinda from poking a finger into an electric outlet? Melinda crawled around a lot, be-

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cause Lee was against confining her too much in her crib. "When she's really tired, she'll sleep better," Lee often said. What else had she said? Maybe "I thought you were working rather well. Aren't you?"

And her dressing table, its top covered with little boxes of pins, lipsticks, perfume bottles, lotions, cologne. Robert had used to look at all that with a smile—mystifying objects, but Lee knew what to do with them. She made herself prettier, different. She amused herself, she amused other people. Boys and men looked at her when they went to restaurants. But Lee didn't invite attention, never had, didn't need to. Maybe men took as flirting one glance from her, but Lee could hardly go around with her eyes shut all the time. No, she hadn't flirted, and once she had decided she liked him, Robert had been the only man for her, he knew that.

One Friday morning, one of the mornings when he had to get up at seven at the latest for the Chicago art school, Robert had quit the house. He had left Lee a note saying that he was going to telephone Tony. *Try it,* Robert had written. *See if you can't love Tony as much as he loves you. You know where to reach me, at the art school. Try it for maybe a month, please? You might find yourself happier.* Robert had taken a furnished room not far from the school. If Tony didn't work out, Robert had thought of acquiring a second-hand car for himself and giving Lee the car he had taken, their car. She was able to drive. Robert envisaged a divorce, of course. He felt a divorce would be better for both of them. Some other Tony would come along. Meanwhile he missed his workroom at home, his clay, a couple of works in progress.

Tony had said on the telephone, "But what happened, Bob? A big quarrel? You sound serious."

"Just look after her. We didn't quarrel, no. It's like a trial. I want to try it." Shocked silence at Tony's end. "She may like you better."

"Oh, no." Tony defensive now. "You've got me wrong, Bob."

"Try it. I invite you." Robert had hung up.

The following Sunday evening around eight, Robert got a telegram from Lee: CANNOT UNDERSTAND YOU. PLEASE COME HOME. I AM SO UNHAPPY. LEE.

Robert had sent his furnished-room address to Lee on Friday, so she would have got his note Saturday morning. He had not sent the name or telephone number of his landlady, so maybe it had been easier for Lee to send a telegram straight to the address. Robert had found it under his door, when he got back from supper.

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And that had been that. After a minute's debate Robert had driven back home. He had not been able to bear the thought of Lee *unhappy*—either because of being alone, or because of not liking Tony, or of being bored or annoyed by him. Robert had been willing to leave his week's rent with Mrs. Kleber, but she gave it back to him except for a charge of one extra day.

Lee's first words to him had been, "What is the matter, Bob? And Tony! What're you trying to do? I never said I liked Tony."

Tony had not been there when Robert got home. Tony had been polite, helpful, it seemed, but Lee did not want him.

Robert fell on his cell cot exhausted, and had to be awakened for his early supper. Hours ago they must have poked lunch at him. He couldn't remember, he must have been daydreaming then.

"God, I wish I had a radio," he murmured to himself. He would have switched on anything just to take his mind off Lee and himself. It grew dark early, because it was December. He walked and walked around his cell, deliberately tiring himself so he could sleep.

The next day at 1:30 P.M. his parents came. Robert was allowed to go into a side room with table and chairs and to talk with them. There were no other prisoners in the room, and only two other cells in the place, as far as Robert could see.

His mother was nervous and looked as if she had been weeping. She was blondish, wore a green tweed dress and a sheepskin coat. His father was as tall as Robert, six feet, a man of 50, a logical man. Robert recognized the downturning of his father's strong mouth. His father was displeased, he didn't understand, was going to be stubborn. Robert remembered that look from his childhood, for his minor misdemeanors. His father now had reason to be grim.

"Bobbie, you must tell us what happened," said his mother.

"What they said happened," Robert replied. "It's the truth."

"Who's they?" asked his father.

"The police, I suppose. I called the police," said Robert.

"We know that," said his mother. "But what happened at home?"

"Nothing." He stopped, having been about to say that he must have had a moment of irrationality, of anger. But that wasn't it.

"You had a quarrel? You'd had a few drinks?" asked his father. "You can tell us the truth Bob. We're in a state of shock, I can tell you that." His father was making an effort to get his words out; he glanced at Robert's mother, then looked back at Robert. He said quietly and earnestly, "It's not *you*, Bob. You worshipped Lee, that we know.—Can't you talk to us?"

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"Was there another man in the picture?" asked his mother. "We thought of that. This Tony you mentioned in your letters—"

"No, no." Robert shook his head. "Tony is a very polite fellow."

"Polite, well," said his father tolerantly, hoping for a lead here.

"No, it's got nothing to do with Tony," Robert said.

His mother asked gently, "What did Lee do?"

"Nothing," Robert answered. "She just changed."

"Changed how?" asked his father.

"She turned into a different person from the one I married. She didn't *do* anything.—Maybe she was just herself, after all. Why not?" He tried to sound reasonable. What they were talking about was perhaps not susceptible to reason, not to be understood in logical terms. Also Robert had never been intimate with his parents, or tried to talk with either of them about his moods, his crushes and loves in his adolescence. They had been sympathetic about his wanting to go to art school, though Robert knew his father had considered it impractical, somehow "easy," undemanding and unrewarding. He was an artist, therefore more sensitive, Robert supposed they thought, so what he had done must be all the more unbelievable to them.

"Changed how?" his father repeated. "Neglecting you maybe, paying more attention to the baby. I've heard of that happening, but—"

"It was *not* that." Robert was suddenly impatient, wanted to end the useless conversation. "I've been absolutely unreasonable," Robert said, "and I deserve everything they're going to give me or do to me."

His mother's hand shook as she reached in her pocketbook for a tissue, but she was not weeping now. She gave her a nose a pinch. "Bobbie, we've talked to a lawyer by telephone, one who knows the state laws here, and we'll see him this afternoon. He says if there had been a quarrel about anything, if you'd been angry about something, it would help you when—"

"I refuse that," Robert interrupted, "because it's not true."

His parents exchanged a glance, then his father said calmly, "We'll see you again, Bob, after we talk with the lawyer. When is it, Mary, four, isn't it?"

"Between four and four thirty, he said."

"He's coming to see us at our hotel, and I know he'll want to talk with you tomorrow morning. His name is McIver. Good man, I'm told."

It was all less important to Robert than a stage play taking place

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at a distance from him. Lawyers, rules, putting everything into abstract phrases, more abstract than himself and Lee—which was difficult enough for Robert.

His parents got up from their chairs. Robert thanked them. They left, and Robert with them, walking quietly out of the room, into the hall where a guard stood up to escort Robert to his cell. His mother pressed Robert's hand. The guard looked at Robert's hand afterward, as if to see if his mother had put anything into it.

Before the guard closed his cell door, Robert asked for some paper and a pen. The guard brought him three sheets of ruled paper (Robert disliked ruled paper) and a ballpoint pen. When he sat down at the little table, he realized that a pack of cigarettes was bulging his back pocket. His mother had produced the pack from her handbag, Robert remembered, saying something about having had to use a machine to buy them in a hurry or she would have bought a carton.

Robert closed his eyes, deliberately tried to make his mind go blank, and at the same time think about his theme, as he did with sculpture, but now his theme was Lee as a person. When he tried to think of Lee as a piece of sculpture, he often thought of the words grace, strength, sometimes one or the other, sometimes combined. Grace was easy to combine with Lee. She had never made a clumsy gesture that he could recall. She walked gracefully, as if she weighed nothing. But the strength? She had had it, all her own, a strength that he didn't understand.

Finally he wrote (it seemed to him a fragment, but he could go back or forward from here):

> To see her wilt before my eyes like that was frightening to me, like a slow death in itself. People speak of blossoming with childbirth, love, all that. It was not true in Lee's case. But what I write here is by no means an effort on my part to excuse what I did.

Did he have to add that awful last sentence? Well, he could cross it out later. For whom was he writing this, anyway?

> She gave up her photography, except for some mediocre pictures of the baby. What can one do with a baby? At least in regard to Lee's former bent of character, intellect, tragedy in the human face—nothing. Instead of her good cameras, she might as well have been using a cheap pocket camera. She had stopped talking about the photography exhibitions in Indianapolis and Chicago. We used to go quite a lot. We knew some of the photographers who lived in those cities. They had grad-

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ually stopped visiting us.

All this was so unnecessary! I can look back now on the work Lee did just before we married, just after. Terrific! And easy for her! Powerful! I thought I was the cause of all this downslide, this collapse really, so I offered to go away, support her from afar, as it might be, until she found maybe another man to share her life with. She declined this and

Here Robert stopped, seeing suddenly the living room that last evening, Lee's photographs gracing the walls, blown-up, her old good stuff, people, buildings. There hadn't been a quarrel, no. Lee had been on her feet, talking about ordinary things—that there had been a telephone call from Fred Muldaven, a friend of Robert's who lived in Chicago, a painter. Melinda had been in her crib in the kitchen then. It was around six or seven in the evening. Robert had been in a strange mood, he had realized, staring at Lee without listening much to what she said. He had just driven back from Chicago, and maybe he had been drinking a cold beer straight from the can.

"Beecham's has a sale of desert boots," Lee had said, "and you could use a new pair. Those look awful."

That had been merely unimportant, boring. A couple of years before, Lee would have paid no attention whether his desert boots were worn out, or if his shoes needed a shine. Old falling-apart clothes had their place, and it was nice to dress up sometimes too, but why talk about it? Why bother trying to please the public, or whoever might look at his sloppy desert boots?

Yet nothing that evening had been what Robert could call the last straw. Rather the atmosphere had been one of quiet gloom, hopelessness, a slowing up as if something were coming to an end, like a train losing momentum because the engine has been shut off. They had gone into the kitchen. Melinda, symbol of the future, had for once been sleeping quietly. And had any vision of Lee at the Chicago art school danced before his eyes as he watched her fussing at the stove? Had any of her enchanting air of "I don't care if I ever see you again or not," as in the days before they married, come back into his head? Whatever, it was all gone now. He had picked up the rolling pin, floury from something Lee had just made, and that had been it.

Robert got up from the chair and walked around the cell. He moved back to the table, his hand reached out for the cigarette pack, and drew slowly back. He was thinking of something else—Lee dead,

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the baby at Lee's mother's, himself dead too. It was all abstract somehow. There had been no word from Lee's mother, or from Fred Muldaven (that was a new friendship and Robert supposed that Fred was now afraid of him), only from his parents, natural appurtenances, calling on him, because by blood they were linked, like a triple star floating around in space. And to be just a little more concrete, though the fact as such did not matter, Robert was going to spend the next 15 years (with the lightest sentence) in prison, working if he worked at all in a prison art department, being told when to get up and when to go to bed, being reminded of Lee day after day by barred window and door, being reminded of the way she had been, which was even worse.

He wrote one more sentence: What a terrible shame I once loved her so much. I do think that ruined everything.

Then he did light a cigarette, and stood looking at the gray and rather rough wall across from his cot. And Melinda. Should he write one *more* sentence to that young creature of whose personality he knew nothing at all? He knew something, of course: she seemed to be cheerful by nature, but that could change by the time she was 12 or so.

He decided not to write a word to Melinda. She was in good hands. She would grow up to hate him. She would look at all the pretty, the beautiful photographs of her mother, and hate him. And his statues of Lee? Would Lee's mother have those thrown away, broken up?

Robert sat on his cot for a couple of minutes, finishing his cigarette. Then he put it out in the metal ashtray on his table. For no reason he lifted his left hand and looked at his watch. 4:37 in the afternoon.

Robert stooped by his cot, facing the wall opposite in the position of a runner about to take off. Then he ran forward with all the force he had, all the force, he felt, that he had ever put into his work, and very briefly with a vision of a statue of Lee, better than any he had ever made. His head hit the wall.

"Q"

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The author, E. P. Moses, is in his mid-thirties. He grew up in a small town in Kansas. In the army he served as a sentry-dog handler, and since then has taught English at Kansas State U. and Akron U. His hobbies include gardening, hiking, and mushrooming . . .

DEATH ANGEL

by E. P. MOSES

I didn't meet the Judge's new wife for almost a year after he married her. Nobody did—not to say meet. The Judge just wasn't the sort of man you could drop in on with a casserole to help him warm his house. To tell the truth, it would have taken more than the combined hospitality of Apple Creek, Missouri to do that anyway. Since he retired from the bench five years ago he never left his own grounds, which were 400 acres of some of the primest bottomland in Crow Wing County, except that one time to get married and go on the honeymoon.

At first Melinda came into town every week or so, I guess just to look around. But there wasn't much to see, Apple Creek being what it is. And if you were supposed to be a lady, which the Judge's wife just naturally was, there wasn't much to do either. You could drink tea and gossip at Miss Simpson's. Melinda, though—with her black hair and hot eyes, and the way she moved—she looked more like she ought to be helling around the back roads in a pickup.

The womenfolk said she was standoffish, and worse than that,

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too. Because Melinda was from way back in the hills, a hillbilly if you were feeling friendly about it. When Carolyn put that word "lady" next to her, it was like a hunk of catfish a little too old to swallow. "And don't you be looking at her like that, either," she warned me.

Well, of course I never have looked at another woman, except for just looking, in the almost 30 years we've been married, but I knew better than to argue. I just said I wouldn't, and then Melinda stopped coming into town so I couldn't have anyway. I don't know if the Judge told her not to or she just got bored.

This time I met Melinda I didn't plan it. And if I hadn't been trespassing it wouldn't have happened. But what with fetching and sweeping and getting yelled at down at the hardware store all week, and then the chores and marketing and Carolyn fussing at me the rest of the time, I like to get off by myself. I can't go any farther than I can walk, though. One time about ten years ago I got drunk and banged the car into a big old shagbark hickory, and the Judge and Carolyn put their heads together, and what came out of it was that I'm not allowed to drive any more. So seeing as how the Judge doesn't grow or graze anything on his land, and it's not but two miles out of town on the far side of the creek, I can't afford to pass it up. I walk around quiet, looking at the birds and flowers that aren't his anyway. So far he's never paid no mind.

It was a nice bright Saturday afternoon in July, though it was going to storm by nightfall. I waded the creek and crawled under the Judge's barbed wire and was just wandering along under the trees, humming to myself, when I saw her. She had on a white dress, which you'd think would look out of place in the woods but somehow seemed just right, and a picnic basket on her arm.

She spotted me before I could duck down out of sight, so there was nothing to do but face it out. I could feel my heart pounding. If she told the Judge and the Judge told Carolyn I was there, I was in big trouble.

She seemed real friendly, though. She smiled and said, "Hello, who are you?" Not who the hell are you to be walking on my land, but like she just wanted to know.

"Homer Wuthrick, at your service, ma'am. I hope you don't mind me being here?"

"Why should I mind? Homer Wuthrick—I've heard that name."

"Nothing bad, I hope, ma'am." Though if it was Carolyn she heard it from you could bet it was nothing good.

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"No, not bad. I heard you were simple. Is that true?"

Which surprised me, because most folks are too polite to mention it to my face. Yet it didn't seem like she said it to hurt me, like the kids used to in school. So I said, "I guess it is. One time I overheard Carolyn—that's my Missus—talking about how I can tell when a storm's coming. She said it was like a consolation prize from God for being the way I am."

Melinda thought about that for a minute. Then she said, "You hear pretty good though, don't you? You didn't happen to hear the Judge just a while ago? We set out mushrooming, but he got tired and went on back."

"No, I didn't." Mostly I don't miss much, either. But I guess I had my eyes on too much else to notice this time. She was just beautiful.

"Actually," she went on, "I'm a little bit that way myself. Not simple, I mean, but I can smell a storm. There's one coming, isn't there?"

"There is for sure."

"A big one, you think?"

"Might be. I wouldn't count on getting out tonight."

"That's what I figured." But she didn't seem upset about it, more excited. I knew just how she felt. A good summer storm, with the sky blue-black and the lightning ripping across, is about the prettiest thing you'd want to see.

After that we neither of us said anything and it seemed like she was getting ready to go. I didn't want her to. It wasn't just that she was beautiful, either—the main thing was, she was nice to me. If your name is Homer T. Wuthrick that's not something that happens every day. So to keep her a little longer I said, "Did you find a lot of mushrooms?"

She hesitated for just a second, like she couldn't decide whether to show me or not, and then she held out the basket. "Quite a few," she said. "Look."

Now I guess it's true I'm simple. Carolyn tells me so often enough, and she ought to know if anybody does. But you can't walk the woods and fields for 40 years with your eyes and ears wide open without learning something. When I looked at what she had in that basket a shudder went right through me. "Those white ones are poison," I said. "They'll kill you sure as thunder."

She looked surprised but not as shocked as I thought she would. "No," she said. "No, you're wrong. The Judge checked them for me before he went back, and he said they were all good."

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"They're poison, I tell you. Maybe the Judge's eyes aren't what they used to be. You better not eat them."

For just a second she looked doubtful, like she believed me and was getting ready to toss them out. But then she said, "No—listen, the Judge has been picking mushrooms around here for years. He even has books on them. Goodbye!" With that she turned around and started off through the trees.

I just stood there. You might think, if I was so sure, I would have run after her, grabbed the basket, and pitched it in the creek—anything to stop her. But I guess it must have been what you'd call a reflex. If the Judge said one thing and I said something else, then he was right and I was wrong.

Only I *wasn't.*

Or was I?

Anyway, by that time Melinda was out of sight, on her way back to the house. I sat on a log for a good long time, trying to straighten it out.

And all I could come up with was this—if I was right about those mushrooms, then the Judge was planning to murder Melinda.

I tried to work out why, too, but I couldn't think of a thing except maybe she was fooling around on him and he caught her. He was 65, if a day, and she couldn't have been much over 20. And there was that crooked-faced handyman on the place, Jack Graves, that you'd see in town now and again running the Judge's errands. I didn't like to think it of her. Except I couldn't help remembering those hot eyes.

The next thing I had to think of was what to do. I knew, whatever it was, I'd be in for a lot of grief. Back before Carolyn got me tamed down I was up in front of the Judge a few times for drunk and disorderly, and he wasn't what you'd call understanding about it—so folks would say I held a grudge. And they'd say what did simple Homer Wuthrick know about mushrooms compared to the Judge that had books about them? Plus it would get back to Carolyn that I was on the Judge's land.

So what with one thing and another I was getting ready to forget about it, feeling uneasy but trying to tell myself I might have been wrong after all, when I walked right up on a big white mushroom just like the ones Melinda had in the basket. They're common around here. You see them all the time, even in town. And if the Judge had books about them, then wouldn't the library have some too? I snatched it up and started back to town . . .

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"Why, Homer," Miss Makin said, "how nice to see you. And what a fine big mushroom. But you'd better be careful, it might be a toadstool." Which, the way folks treat you, is the worst part about being simple.

"That's what I had it in mind to find out," I said. "If you happened to have a book on it?"

"I believe we might." She found it for me, and then of course she had to say, "There—with lots of nice pictures." I happen to be able to read. Not as fast as some, maybe, but I get where I'm going.

But I didn't worry about that right then, people being mean to me, because when I started looking through the book it was already after five. If he was planning to feed her those mushrooms for supper I didn't have much time. I could feel the storm coming up, too. So what happened, I got in a hurry and went too fast, and it took me almost a whole hour to find it. When I did there wasn't a speck of doubt.

The official name, which was *Amanita verna,* didn't make much sense to me. But what folks called it did—Death Angel. I'd heard that myself. A piece as big as your little fingernail was enough to kill you, and what made it worse, you didn't start to get sick for eight hours or more after you ate it. By that time it was most likely too late to do anything. "Miss Makin," I said, "I need this book!"

"Why, Homer, how nice to see you taking an interest. But you'll need a card, won't you?"

So I had to stand on one foot for ten minutes while she wrote out the paper for the card.

Actually I don't know why I was in such a hurry. Chief Allenbaugh wasn't going to listen to me anyway. But I ran out of the library like the devil was after me, with the book in one hand and the mushroom in the other, and of course I wound up getting to the Chief's house right when he was sitting down to supper. When he came to the door with his napkin, looking grumpy—well, wouldn't you know it? I couldn't think how to get started. I just stood there with my jaw flapping in the wind, which by now was considerable.

The Chief said, "What is it, Homer? Make it quick."

He never was too friendly to start with, but if you got in the way of his dinner he was a bear. You could tell that without even knowing him, just by looking at his belly. So when I finally blurted it out, about the Judge and Melinda and the mushroom, I thought he was going to explode right where he was standing. Or run me in for being a public nuisance. "Homer," he said, "get the hell out of here."

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"But aren't you even going to check it out?"

"No, Homer. If the Judge said the mushrooms were good, the mushrooms were good. Now go on home. Can't you see it's going to rain?" And he shut the door in my face. He never even looked at the picture in the book.

Any fool could see it by now, of course—I mean the rain coming. The sky was black from one edge to the other, the wind was whipping up, and it was thundering loud.

I guess that, and the way the Chief treated me, and what the book said about not just dying but dying in awful agony, I guess that was why I panicked. I could have walked out to the Judge's in under half an hour, showed Melinda the mushroom and the picture, and had her to Dr. Mortimer's in plenty of time to get her pumped out. But I was in too much of a rush for that—I had to have the car, which meant getting the keys from Carolyn.

By the time I got home it was raining cats and dogs. The book was soaked, too. I was going to have to ask Carolyn for money to pay for it.

What made it worse was, she wasn't alone. She had Mrs. Travers with her, the banker's wife, who of course she wanted to show off for. The way she did that was to pitch right into me.

"Homer," she said, "you're late for dinner. Stop dripping on the rug. And what is that revolting object?"

"It's a poison mushroom," I said—pretty sullen.

"Nonsense. If you said a mushroom was a gourmet's delight, I'd know to chop it up for rat poison. Your saying that one's bad is proof to me that it's perfectly wholesome. Now get in the bathroom and wash up."

"Never mind that," I said. "Just give me the keys to the car."

"What did you say?"

I didn't waste time asking again. I just grabbed up her bag from the table and started fishing out the keys. She came clawing at me and I had to shove her back down on the sofa, with Mrs. Travers screaming blue murder, but I got the keys and was out to the car before they could get themselves collected. When I took off I could see them standing out there by the curb, looking like a couple of drowned rats. That wasn't going to make Carolyn any happier either.

I ought to have been there in five minutes, even with the rain. But you have to remember I hadn't driven for ten years. I was veering back and forth some, and then when I turned onto the dirt

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road out to the Judge's it was bumpy and slick. I was going too fast, too. So just as I came up on the bridge I skidded and wound up banging into the rail.

When I got out I could see the front end was hanging out over the creek. I didn't let it worry me, though. Carolyn couldn't kill me but once. I just ran the last quarter of a mile to the Judge's house and pounded on the door.

Jack Graves opened it. He always makes me nervous—his face is all crooked angles, so you can't tell if he's smiling at you all the time or his mouth is just shaped that way.

"I've got to see Melinda," I said.

"What for?"

Then I thought—well, if they were fooling around together he sure ought to care what happens to her. So I said, "She ate some poison mushrooms—by mistake. We got to get her to the doctor's."

"Didn't nobody in this house eat no toadstools. Now get out of here." And he would have shut the door on me, except by then I'd pushed my way into the room.

"You're wrong," I said. "The Judge knows all about you two. And he's fixing to murder her for it."

That finally got through to him. The smile went off his face, but before he had a chance to do or say anything the Judge was standing in the doorway. He had gray hair and ice-water eyes behind wire-rimmed glasses, and stood maybe five ten. When you were standing in front of him in court with your head hanging down, though, he looked about seven feet tall. He did now.

He said, "Go on, Jack. I'll take care of this."

Then when we were alone he said, "What brings you out here, Homer?"

I was scared of him, of course, but I didn't see any sense in beating around the bush. So I took a deep breath and said, "I'm onto you, Judge. You poisoned Melinda with a mushroom that you told her was good, and if she dies you're in a heap of trouble. You better get her to Doc Mortimer's right away."

Those eyes never flickered. He said, "I assure you, Homer, the only mushrooms we ate in this house today came from the market. Now if you don't mind?"

"I do mind! You're a liar! I want to see Melinda!"

From behind me a voice said, "Now you just calm yourself way down." It was the Chief. I felt so bad, I wanted to lie right down on the floor and cry.

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"Carolyn called me," he said. "I figured you'd be here. You just come along quiet and don't be bothering folks."

So that was that. I tried to tell him on the way back to town, but he wouldn't listen. When he put me in the cell he said, "Your Missus said if she sees you again tonight she can't answer for it. She said that before she even knew what you did to the car. So I'm gonna give you a break and let you sleep it off here."

"At least call Doc Mortimer. Ask him to come over and look at this mushroom." Because I'd kept it all the time, though by now there wasn't much left to look at.

"You look at it, Homer. Maybe it'll remind you not to be such a damn fool next time."

He left me alone. And you can guess what it reminded me of. Eight hours, the book said, which meant if they ate at six she'd be sick as early as two in the morning. It was still raining hard—and when we crossed the bridge on the way into town, the creek was almost full. Melinda was so beautiful, and nice to me, and there wasn't a thing in the world I could do for her. I lay awake all night. When two o'clock came I felt so sick I thought I was going to throw up on the floor.

Chick Smith, who's the other half of the Apple Creek Police Department, didn't let me out till late the next afternoon. That was most likely Carolyn's doing—her idea of a good lesson. By then the sun was shining again. It took me 20 minutes, running and walking, to get out to the Judge's house. The bank had caved during the night, I noticed, and the car was nose down in the creek. Doc Mortimer's car was there, sure enough, and the Chief's too. I went right in without knocking. They were standing in the foyer, the doctor, especially, looking tired and upset.

"Homer," Doc said. "Dammit, man, the Chief told me you knew this was going to happen yesterday. Why didn't you come to me before it was too late?"

"Too late? You mean there's nothing you can do?"

"Not a damn thing. I've called for the ambulance, but it was a massive dose and it's had too long to work."

"Then there's no hope at all? She's really going to die?"

"She? What are you talking about? It's the Judge that's dying."

Then of course there was a big hullaballoo, and I had to tell them everything I knew. It was different now—they listened to every word I said. They didn't seem any too happy about it, though.

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Finally the Chief said to Doc, "Any chance of a deathbed statement?"

"Not now. If they'd called me earlier—"

"Which is why they didn't. No way to get over the creek until an hour ago anyway. So they get away with it."

"Looks as if. With a case like this there's no way to prove it wasn't an honest mistake. And even if it came to trial, you put a woman like Melinda on the stand—"

"Wait a minute," I said. "Get away with what? The Judge was the one told her the mushrooms were good."

The Chief looked at me disgusted. "How do you know that?" he said.

"Because . . . Oh."

"Exactly. Because she told you."

"But why would she do that?"

They glanced at each other sidelong, asking had they better tell me, and then Doc Mortimer shrugged. "She was pregnant," he said. "She said that was why she didn't want any mushrooms—didn't have a taste for them."

"But she wouldn't have killed him because of that."

"The Judge was sterile, Homer. He couldn't father children."

"Oh," I said. And thought about Jake Graves's face, and what that baby was going to look like.

Then I said, "Could I go home now?"

"Yeah," the Chief said. "Go on home. Stay out of trouble, hear?"

"That's where I wish I was myself," Doc said. "Home, and then on my way to the mountains. I ought to have been on vacation by now."

Which I didn't think about at all, I had so much else on my mind, until I got home and Carolyn laid into me. She called me a moron, an idiot, a cretin, a numskull, and that was just for starters. She said I was going to take odd jobs on the weekends to pay for the car, and until I had that done, which as shiftless as I was she figured would take about five years, I could forget about going out into the country. And when I wasn't doing that or the chores, she wanted me in the parlor where she could keep an eye on me, with my back straight and my feet on the floor.

So I sat in the parlor and put some things together in my mind.

She said right in front of Mrs. Travers, who's the wife of the richest man in town, that me thinking a mushroom was bad proved it was good.

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Doc Mortimer said you could never prove a case like that wasn't an honest mistake.

In the next couple of days Carolyn is going to be putting up a pot of stew. I know because I brought the beef and carrots and onions and mushrooms home from the market in my own arms. It was a heavy load in the hot sun.

You don't have to go out of town to find those Death Angels. After a good rain they pop up all over the place.

Doc Mortimer's on vacation. And between here and Mt. Vernon, which is where you have to go for help when he's gone, there's four bridges.

And you want to know the best part? I'm simple. Us simple folk just naturally get everything wrong, don't we?

STATEMENT OF OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT AND CIRCULATION (Act of August 12, 1970: Section 3685, Title 39, United States Code)

1. Title of Publication: Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine. 2. Date of filing: October 1, 1979. 3. Frequency of Issue: Monthly. 4. Location of Known Office of Publication: 380 Lexington Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10017.

5. Location of the Headquarters or General Business Offices of the Publishers (not printers): 380 Lexington Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10017.

6. Names and Addresses of Publisher, Editor and Managing Editor: Publisher: Joel Davis, 380 Lexington Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10017; Editor: Ellery Queen, 380 Lexington Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10017; Managing Editor: Eleanor Sullivan, 380 Lexington Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10017.

7. Owner: Davis Publications, Inc., 380 Lexington Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10017: Joel Davis, 380 Lexington Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10017; B.G. Davis Trust, 380 Lexington Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10017; Carol Davis Teten, 380 Lexington Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10017.

8. Known Bondholders, Mortgagees and Other Security Holders Owning or Holding 1 Percent or More of Total Amount of Bonds, Mortgages or Other Securities: None.

10. Extent and Nature of Circulation. Average No. Copies Each Issue During Preceding 12 Months (A) Total No. Copies Printed (Net Press Run): 363,976; (B) Paid Circulation: (1) Sales Through Dealers and Carriers, Street Vendors and Counter Sales: 49,411; (2) Mail Subscriptions: 231,814; (C) Total Paid Circulation: 281,225; (D) Free Distribution by Mail, Carrier or Other Means, Samples, Complimentary, and Other Free Copies: 340; (E) Total Distribution (Sum of C and D): 281,565; (F) Copies Not Distributed: (1) Office Use, Left-Over, Unaccounted, Spoiled After Printing: 8,639; (2) Returns from News Agents: 73,772; (G) Total (Sum of E and F — Should Equal Net Press Run Shown in A): 363,976.

Actual Number Copies of Single Issue Published Nearest to Filing Date. (A) Total No. Copies Printed (Net Press Run): 369,752; (B) Paid Circulation: (1) Sales Through Dealers and Carriers, Street Vendors and Counter Sales: 53,100; (2) Mail Subscriptions: 239,755; (C) Total Paid Circulation: 292,855; (D) Free Distribution by Mail, Carrier or Other Means, Samples, Complimentary, and Other Free Copies: 315; (E) Total Distribution (Sum of C and D): 293,170; (F) Copies Not Distributed: (1) Office Use, Left Over, Unaccounted, Spoiled After Printing: 1,632; (2) Returns from News Agents: 74,950; (G) Total (Sum of E and F — Should Equal Net Press Run Shown in A): 369,752.

I certify that the statements made by me above are correct and complete.

V. C. Stabile
Vice President and Treasurer

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DEPARTMENT OF "FIRST STORIES"

This is the 545th "first story" to be published by Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine . . . Once again we should all be mightily encouraged by a first appearance in print. The author, Cecil Talley, was sixty-three when he submitted "The Farmer in the Well"—take heart, all you beginners!

Mr. Talley thinks his wife ("who has endured me for forty-two years"), his two sons, and his five granddaughters will get a thrill out of seeing "The Farmer in the Well" in EQMM. They should indeed! Mr. Talley is "an old sign painter who never made it past the eighth grade." We share their thrill—as we do with all our new writers, old and young . . .

THE FARMER IN THE WELL

by CECIL TALLEY

The inquest established that the man, in his mid-thirties, had been dead about two days when Sheriff Roy Telford and his Deputy, Jack Sanford, retrieved the body from the old cistern.

"Roy," said Dr. Stephens, acting coroner for Jones County, "there is something unusual about this case. Why on earth would anyone want to shoot a man who had just been stung by about thirty wasps? There's enough venom in this body to kill a Percheron stud horse and a Jersey bull."

"You mean he was stung to death? I thought he was killed by a load of buckshot."

"Oh, it was the shotgun that killed him all right, but the wasps got to him first. If he had been shot first and stung later—say, when he was dumped in the well—the poison would not be in the blood; it would just remain in little pockets under the skin."

"Well," drawled the sheriff, "how's this for a theory? We know that Clem Wessel was a transient farm worker. He sneaks into some

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farmer's smokehouse to steal a ham, bumps into a wasp nest, and runs out hollering. The farmer comes out with his shotgun and shoots the man, who by this time has run about a hundred yards. I believe you did say the guy was shot from about that distance."

"Yes, judging from the size and weight of the pellets, the spread of the pattern, and the depth of penetration, I'd say a hundred yards would be a fair estimate. But, as for your theory, I can't imagine any farmer letting wasps make nests in his smokehouse. Also, if the man had been running away from the farmer, he would have been shot in the back, but he wasn't. The pellets caught him in the left side. Of course, I suppose he could have turned just as the shot was fired."

Sheriff Telford planned to spend the next day calling on the farmers in the general area in which the body had been found. The long-abandoned old house with the cistern was located about 20 miles south of town in an area known as the Shinnery, a large, sparsely inhabited hunk of real estate consisting of deep sand and overgrown with scrub oak.

Going into the Shinnery for the first time, one is struck by the abrupt change. The sudden transition from relatively open countryside, firm soil, grassy cow pastures, cotton fields, and large mesquite trees to the shadowy gloom of the dense, straight-growing oak trees tends to give a person a strange, eerie feeling. It is entirely possible to become lost in the interior, and strange tales of lost people going mad after wandering around for days are common. The remoteness and the bewildering sameness tends to confuse the senses, and a stranger to the region is likely to panic if he goes in alone.

Telford had grown up in the small farm-and-ranch town and knew almost every permanent resident in the county. He knew that virtually all the farmers and ranchers owned shotguns, a fact which was no help in eliminating any of them as suspects. He realized also that the killer could be someone not living anywhere near the area, as hunters from the surrounding towns occasionally came to the Shinnery to hunt the abundant red tree squirrels. His job would not be easy.

Eli Barber was one of the farmers who lived almost on the edge of the Shinnery, and his farm was the closest to the solitary old house where Clem Wessel had been found. Roy and Eli had gone to school together as boys and were close friends. So when Roy knocked on Eli's door, it was more a social call than otherwise.

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Eli's wife had recently died, leaving him with a thirteen-year-old daughter, and it was she who answered Roy's knock. She was a nice-looking girl, but slightly retarded mentally. But if her mind was slow in developing, her body was not, a pleasing attribute which the boys in the neighborhood had not overlooked, and so it was understandable that Eli had become somewhat overprotective.

"Hello, Rachel. Is your papa home?"

The girl, ordinarily cheerful and outgoing, appeared startled and a little nervous at the sight of the sheriff. Instead of returning the greeting, she merely turned and called to her father, who was in a back room.

"Rachel, you look a little pale, and I see you have some spots on your face. Have you been sick, honey?"

"No, sir, I was stung by—"

"—a bee." Eli finished her statement. "Hi, Roy. What brings you out so early? You investigatin' some heinous crime, like maybe somebody swiped a hoe or something?"

"A bit more serious than that, I'm afraid."

After they had gone inside and were seated, Eli said to Rachel, "Honey, bring us some coffee, and then you finish doing the dishes while us menfolk talk. Now, Roy, what's so all-fired serious that you're out of bed before ten o'clock?"

"You mean you haven't heard? I thought everyone in Jones County knew by now about the farmhand the Wheatley boys found dead in the cistern out at the old Gorman place. I was hoping you might have noticed some stranger around here lately. I don't have a ghost of a lead."

"No, Roy, I ain't seen a thing. Wish I could be more help."

"Oh, well, I wanted to come out and see how you two were getting along, anyway. By the way, how did Rachel get the stings on her face? Did she knock over a beehive?"

"No, we was comin' home from town the other day, and this dern bee got in the car, and it popped her four times before I could stop the car and kill it."

"A bee? Are you sure it wasn't a wasp?"

"Look," Eli said a little testily, "I just told you I killed the blame thing, and I reckon I know a bee from a wasp."

Startled, Roy did not want to believe that he had heard correctly. Was it possible that a man who had spent most of his life on a farm didn't know a bee can sting only once? Or was he so anxious to avoid any mention of wasps that it caused him to make a slip?

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"Eli," he said at last, "how long have me and you been good friends?"

"Ever since we wore knee britches and played marbles together, I reckon." Obviously relieved to change the subject, he started to reminisce about their carefree boyhood days, but Roy cut him short.

"In all these years I think this is the first time I ever heard you tell a lie. Eli, you're not a good liar. Even if I didn't know anything about bees, I'd have known you were lying. You just don't have the knack for it. Now, you want to tell me about it? Was it an accident? I know you too well to believe you could deliberately shoot anyone."

The farmer's face turned red, then ashen. He looked as if he were about to faint. "All right, Roy," he said meekly, his voice little more than a whisper. "I orta knowed I couldn't fool you. Never could.

"The other day I hitched my mules to the wagon and went down to the field to gather corn. I've been taking my shotgun with me lately, hoping to get that dad-blame fox that's been carrying off my chickens. Rachel had brought me some cold lemonade and was on her way back to the house when this Clem Wessel fella stepped out from among the trees. I heard Rachel screamin', and just as I looked up I seen him run over and throw his coat over her head. She broke loose and started to run towards the house, and this Wessel took out after her. He was about twenty steps behind her, and she was still screaming.

"Without hardly even thinking, I grabbed the shotgun and fired, I guess from about a hundred yards. Rachel kept on running to the house, and when I got to the man he was dead. I had never seen him before. I went to the house, put Rachel to bed, and told her to stay there till I got back. Then I put the body in the wagon and covered it with a tarp. I was going to bury him in the Shinnery, but when I got nearly there, I suddenly realized that I forgot to bring a shovel. I didn't want to take the time to go back for it, for fear someone would see me, and I didn't want to leave Rachel alone too long.

"So when I saw the old house and the dry cistern, I just laid the body on the tarp, drug it over, and dumped him in. I know it wasn't very smart of me, but I was half out of my mind. Honest, Roy, I started to call you, but I got to wondering what would become of my little girl if I had to go to the pen. We ain't got no kinfolk to take care of her, and she needs me." He fell silent and looked away, avoiding Roy's eyes.

"Eli, are you sure you've told me everything? I get the feeling

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that you're holding back something. You still haven't explained the wasp stings."

Eli swallowed hard, and Roy saw tears welling up in his eyes. The farmer turned and buried his face in his hands, Roy waiting until he regained control of himself. Presently the farmer pulled a huge red bandanna from his back pocket, wiped his eyes, and loudly blew his nose.

"I was hopin' I wouldn't have to tell about that. What I have told you was what I thought I was seeing. I didn't know no different until Rachel told me later. When she was on her way back to the house after bringing the lemonade, she spotted something shiny on the ground under a big mesquite tree. When she went over to pick it up she bumped into a great big wasp nest which was hanging on a low branch.

"She started screamin' just as the man, Clem Wessel, stepped out into the lane, and when he seen what was happening, he ran over and throwed his coat over her and told her to run. By this time the wasps was all over him, and he started running too. Roy, I killed a man who risked his life to save my little girl."

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ELLERY QUEEN'S MYSTERY NEWSLETTER

CRIME DOSSIER

by OTTO PENZLER

PAPER CRIMES: With the production costs of books escalating at an increasingly alarming rate, the retail prices of so many volumes have gone out of the range of most people who merely want to buy a book to read.

The only hope for those of us on somewhat limited budgets seemed, a few years back, to be paperbound books, but look at what has happened: their cost has leaped up at a faster rate than more durable hardcover books. Two years ago, for example, Doubleday published Jack Tracy's bulky *The Encyclopedia Sherlockiana* at $10.00. It has recently been issued by Avon in paperback at $7.95.

The Bedside, Bathtub & Armchair Companion to Agatha Christie (Frederick Ungar), edited by Dick Riley and Pam McAllister, recently had a simultaneous hard and soft cover publication—at $17.95 and $9.95 respectively. It was, quite clearly, influenced by the enormous success a few years ago of *Murder Ink*, but it focuses on the work of a single writer rather than the full spectrum of the genre. It is a delightful book, and a perfect addition to the library of every Christie lover, with lengthy synopses of all the books in the opera as well as articles about the variety of poisons used by the Christie villains, a Christie Mystery Map of Southern England, and countless other delights. It would be easy to cavil with certain assessments made herein, such as categorizing *The Tuesday Club Murders* as a novel rather than the short-story collection it so obviously is, and stating that the contents of *The Hound of Death* are "not really murder mystery stories. They are something else entirely—bizarre fantasies, ghost stories, haunted house tales, stories of the macabre and the occult." Well, no, that is not entirely true, because if you have ever read "Witness for the Prosecution" (one of the stories in that book) you would be forced to agree that it is, quite clearly, a murder mystery. Still,

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it is a charming book, and a valuable reference tool.

Another book largely patterned after *Murder Ink* is *Murderess Ink* (Workman Publishing Co., Inc., $14.95 in hard cover, $6.95 in soft), perpetrated by Dilys Winn who had the same byline for the first book. As its title suggests, the book is devoted to mysteries by and/or about women. Since it pays attention to only half the genre, it is appropriately only half the size of its hugely popular progenitor. In spite of its one-sided point of view, it is great fun and a worthy companion.

One of the fattest oversize paperback books in recent months is *Best Mystery and Suspense Plays of the Modern Theatre,* edited by Stanley Richards (Avon, $7.95). Fortunately, Mr. Richards has no aversion to including such golden moments of the stage as *Dracula* (1927), Frederick Knott's brilliant *Dial "M" for Murder* (1952), *Angel Street* (1941), W. Somerset Maugham's *The Letter* (1927), and Joseph Kesselring's zany *Arsenic and Old Lace* (1941) among the more contemporary works of Robert Marasco—*Child's Play* (1970)—and Anthony Shaffer—*Sleuth* (1970). The complete text of ten wonderful plays plus much valuable information in the form of prefaces and introductory notes makes this a key volume for any mystery shelf.

Less essential but no less fascinating is the publication in large format paperback of two long-out-of-print books involving legendary heroes of the pulp era. The Spider is the foe of evildoers in *Builders of the Black Empire* and Operator #5 handles similar chores in *Cavern of the Damned.* Both books are published by Pulp Press, 10606 S. Central Park, Chicago, IL 60655, at $7.95 each, with further adventures planned for immediate publication. With each printing limited to a few hundred copies, it is reasonable to expect the supply to be exhausted in the near future. Be warned!

And speaking of limited printings, there is a new Ross Macdonald book available. *A Collection of Reviews* has just been issued by Lord John Press, 19073 Los Alimos Street, Northridge, CA 91326. Limited to 350 copies, numbered and signed by the author, this exquisitely produced little book is priced at $40.00. The only flaw with the production is its brevity; 67 pages, plus a surprisingly personal and revelatory introduction, is hardly enough to satisfy one's taste for Macdonald's prose. And it *is* an awful lot of money. Still, we may be certain it will not be remaindered, and its chances of getting into paperback are slim. Nor will we ever see the movie, so now is the time to take the plunge. Among the splendid essays contained herein are pieces about James M. Cain, The Detective in Fiction, and a review of Barzun & Taylor's *A Catalog of Crime,* as well as much in a non-criminous vein.

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Still another limited edition which you might not hear about under ordinary circumstances is Ian Shakley's *The Villars-Manningham Papers and Other Stories of Sherlock Holmes* (Catalyst Press, 315 Blantyre Ave., Scarborough, Ontario, Canada, $4.95). The 48-page pamphlet contains three stories, none memorable, but they are passable, which is more than can be said for some of the recent entrants in the Holmes parody sweepstakes. It is limited to 500 numbered copies.

A few non-book items which are mystery-related and may interest some readers, seen in various shops and catalogues, are: solid brass keyrings with tags stamped CIA File Room, Compartment 66 Orient Express, The Bastille, and Alcatraz ($4.00 each); miniature electric chairs which give you a slight shock when you lift them ($6.95); a *Psycho* shower curtain with a life-size silhouette of a knife-wielding person dressed up to look like Anthony Perkins' mother ($25.00); notepaper with representations of Nero Wolfe, Hercule Poirot, The Shadow, The Saint, and Sherlock Holmes ($4.95 per box); silver-plated Sherlock Holmes bookmarks ($7.50); plaster Maltese Falcons, exact replicas of Bogart's "dingus" ($22.50); dartboards and wine cabinets with reproductions of the famous Sherlock Holmes pub sign on the front ($44.00 and $85.00 depending upon the size); a set of glasses called "Name Your Poison" with six different poisons stamped in gold ($20.00 the set of six); Edward Gorey calendars ($4.95); and, of course, lots of records with broadcasts of old Sherlock Holmes and Shadow radio programs. If you hunt around you should be able to find most items in gift shops or bookstores. Have fun.

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BLOODY VISIONS

by CHRIS STEINBRUNNER

Ring! The teenage babysitter has just settled back for the evening when the phone begins to jangle; a stranger's voice on the other end whispers harshly, *"Have you checked the children?"* Scary enough, yet only starters to a film which makes the telephone as much a symbol of menace as did *Sorry, Wrong Number*, and rings up quite a few surprises. *When a Stranger Calls* is a flawed shocker, but has been nonetheless the audience hit of the season.

Its success is based on the simple, familiar surroundings of its premise—a girl alone in a

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large, strange house, at night, bothered by persistent anonymous phone calls—a note of terror which grows and grows. The young creators of the film, producer-writers Steve Feke and Fred Walton, based the start of their film on a newspaper article about a sitter who had been receiving threatening calls from a man who turned out to be in the same house. Walton recalls: "One night Steve and I were kicking around some ideas for movies and TV shows. Steve told me a story that he had seen some years ago in a newspaper, and the tale sent chills down my spine. Right then and there, I was sure we were onto something good."

Actually, the same story has been reported as true in three different parts of the country, and has become as much of a legendary scare tale as the vanishing lady at the fair. It was used, as well, by F. Peter Lee in his magnificently chilling five-minute radio monologues for the Mutual Broadcasting network (some of his programs were collected in a 1975 album called *The Nightwatch*, well worth your listening). In this version, the girl hears only maniac laughter on the other end of the line. She calls the police, who soon call back. They've traced the laughter.

"It's coming from another line in the same house. The caller's in there with you!" *That's when she knew it was too late . . . She put the phone down and turned to face her tormentor, laughing, laughing, laughing in the doorway, and started across the room towards her . . .*

In *When a Stranger Calls* this is only the first stage of the drama, a curtain-raiser for the rest of the story. Feke and Walton first conceived of it, however, as a twenty-minute short film, and indeed produced it as such, calling it *The Sitter*, pooling their own money to make it. "I believed that the short subject could, and would, serve as my entry into the film industry," recalls Walton, "but virtually everyone we talked to in the movie business discouraged us." Everyone was right, for shorts historically earn little money and are fast forgotten; features are the only product distributors are interested in.

But six months later *The Sitter* was booked in a California theater to accompany *Looking for Mr. Goodbar*—and an astute producer there to catch the feature noted with some astonishment that the short was gathering as many screams and audience comments. A deal resulted: *The Sitter* was to be expanded into a full-length movie.

Much of what is wrong with *When a Stranger Calls* is the result of this expansion; the padding is obvious. When the maniac murderer who has menaced the heroine in the beginning escapes after seven years in an asylum, he spends some time in a skid-row episode that brings the story somewhat out

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of focus. But then we return to the guts of the drama: the baby-sitter, now seven years later a suburban housewife with children of her own (Carol Kane is wonderfully good), realizes the madman has selected her family as his new target. While not absolutely top-drawer, *When a Stranger Calls* is still the sort of shocker in which you can happily settle back and scream along.

All the dark shadows of childhood cross the memory while browsing through Val Warren's *Lost Lands, Mythical Kingdoms and Unknown Worlds* (Simon & Schuster, $6.95), a pictorial treasury which pays as much homage to the mystery as it does cinema fantasy: clutching hands stretch from behind secret panels, masked villains stalk the mists, and terror lurks behind every movie set. There are an astonishing number of stills from *rare* and wondrous melodrama movies, and Warren's brief comments on them are the icing to a confection for the eyes. A garden of visual delights, seen at twilight—as the fog rolls in.

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THE JURY BOX

by JON L. BREEN

The reputation of S. S. Van Dine (Willard Huntington Wright), creator of Philo Vance and once the most famous American writer of detective stories, has sadly slipped in recent years, not entirely deservedly. The 1927 novel *The "Canary" Murder Case,* now available in a new paperback edition (Scribners, $2.25), holds up remarkably well on rereading.

Purely as a detective story, it has its defects: the identity of the murderer will not surprise many present-day readers, and the psychology in which Vance sets such great store seems rather simplistic today. Also, Vance stumbles on the final solution of how the crime was done by accident. On the credit side, though, Van Dine has a smooth readability many of his colleagues in the analytical school lacked.

He knew how to keep the story moving. And the outlandish pretentiousness of the footnote-laden narrative, coupled with Vance's affected speaking style and overpowering erudition, still amuse in a way I cannot believe was wholly unintentional.

Perhaps Van Dine belongs to that group of otherwise dissimilar writers—Spillane, Fleming, Keeler, Bellem, Wheatley, Avallone, Chesbro—whose charm lies in their outrageous excess, their insistence on going too far.

**** Catherine Breslin: *Unholy Child,* Dial Press, $12.95. A summary of the plot of this 620-page novel would suggest that the au-

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thor combined four sure-fire elements—medicine, law, sex, and religion—in an effort to create a can't-miss best-seller. But such a description would do an injustice to a substantive novel with considerable depth of characterization and theme. At its center are two memorably drawn female characters: a nun who has given birth and perhaps killed her baby and a reporter who becomes fascinated with the case.

**** The Gordons: *Night After the Wedding,* Doubleday, $8.95. A young house-sitter, terrorized by faceless mobsters who claim she has a million dollars of their money, turns to newly married lawyer Frank Mitchell, a hero with a lot of Perry Mason in him. The last Gordons novel (completed shortly before the death of Mildred Gordon) is a work of consummate professionalism, with a complex plot, a large and colorful cast, and skillfully managed scenes of suspense and menace. The authors have a special way with minor characters, particularly a dignified over-the-hill cop called the General.

*** Marc Lovell: *Hand Over Mind,* Doubleday-Crime Club, $7.95. Investigators for the Ontario Society for Psychical Research (a sexually and ideologically assorted trio with New Series written all over them) look into a case of automatic writing. Though more stolid and straight-faced than Lovell's best, this offers his usual neat plotting job.

*** Robert Barnard: *Death of a Mystery Writer,* Scribners $8.95. For all its satire of the form, the account of the murder of Sir Oliver Fairleigh-Stubbs is a solid, pure detective story and a model of fair play. The telling, though, is the best feature—Barnard is one of the funniest new writers to emerge in the Seventies.

*** Mark Hebden: *Pel and the Faceless Corpse,* Hamish Hamilton, North Pomfret, VT 05053; $16.95. Though the eye-popping price tag of this 187-page import threatens to get in the way of an objective discussion of its merits, it's a good police procedural set in rural France, strong on humor and atmosphere and featuring a believable, unhappy bachelor cop in Inspector Pel.

*** Norma Schier, *Death Goes Skiing,* Zebra Mystery Puzzler #37, $1.95. The third novel about Aspen District Attorney Kay Barth is the best to date, suspenseful and cunningly plotted. A new feature in the publisher's illustrated series explains the pictorial clues, which play generally fair, though some are more valid than others.

** John Reisman: *P.S. Your Shrink Is Dead,* Leisure Books, $1.95. Psychologist Jacob Rubin turns sleuth to find the murderer of an old classmate and controversial therapist. Though the mystery construction is somewhat faulty—the ending is telegraphed by a clue that is much too broad—there are some nice humorous touches, especially the unique situation in the confronting-the-killer scene, which

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I wish I could describe further without breaking the rules of mystery reviewing.

Finally, here is a book I found impossible to rate. In *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Holmes* (Doubleday, $8.95), Loren D. Estleman has done a splendid job of rewriting Robert Louis Stevenson's *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* as a Sherlock Holmes story. The book is thus recommended if you think that is worth doing. I have my doubts.

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DETECTIVERSE

THE FINAL VERDICT

by BILLY BARTON

The judgment is harsh
from Sayers to Marsh
and other Grand Doyennes of Death.

Wentworth amuses,
seldom confuses,
or startles me out of my breath.

Tey may embellish,
Rendell add relish,
Brand cut a trail that is twisty.

Though they've been clever,
None has quite ever
Plotted like Agatha Christie!

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a ??? by

NORMAN MAILER

The unpredictable and extraordinary talent of Norman Mailer needs no introduction: the man and his work are always in the public (and private) eye. As his publisher said on the dust jacket of THE ARMIES OF THE NIGHT *(1968): ever since* THE NAKED AND THE DEAD *(1948), Norman Mailer "has entertained, enraged, and diverted us with a body of work more provocative than that of any other American writer."*

Which brings us to Norman Mailer's "The Locust Cry": at first thought you will no doubt wonder why "The Locust Cry" is reprinted in EQMM. Then consider, after you have read this curious and curiously irresistible "story" (note the quotes): isn't there detection (psychiatric)? Isn't there crime (by implication)? But if you still wonder, if you still feel there is neither detection nor crime, isn't there mystery (indeed, more than one)?

THE LOCUST CRY

by NORMAN MAILER

On p. 293 of *The Early Masters*[1] is a short story.

The Test

It is told:

When Prince Adam Czartoryski, the friend and counselor of Czar Alexander, had been married for many years and still had no children, he went to the maggid of Koznitz and asked him to pray for him and because of his prayer the princess bore a son. At the baptism, the father told of the maggid's intercession with God.

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[1] From Martin Buber's *Tales of the Hasidim.* Published by Schocken Books. Volume I: *The Early Masters*, Volume II: *The Later Masters.*

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His brother who, with his young son, was among the guests, made fun of what he called the prince's superstition. "Let us go to your wonder-worker together," he said, "and I shall show you that he can't tell the difference between left and right."

Together they journeyed to Koznitz, which was close to where they lived. "I beg of you," Adam's brother said to the maggid, "to pray for my sick son."

The maggid bowed his head in silence. "Will you do this for me?" the other urged.

The maggid raised his head. "Go," he said, and Adam saw that he only managed to speak with a great effort. "Go quickly, and perhaps you will still see him alive."

"Well, what did I tell you?" Adam's brother said laughingly as they got into their carriage. Adam was silent during the ride. When they drove into the court of his house, they found the boy dead.

What is suggested by the story is an underworld of real events whose connection is never absurd. Consider, in parallel, this Haiku:[2]

So soon to die
and no sign of it showing—
locust cry.

The sense of stillness and approaching death is occupied by the cry of the locust. Its metallic note becomes the exact equal of an oncoming death. Much of Haiku can best be understood as a set of equations in mood. Man inserting himself into a mood extracts an answer from nature which is not only the reaction of the man upon the mood, but is a supernatural equivalent to the quality of the experience, almost as if a key is given up from the underworld to unlock the surface of reality.

Here for example is an intimation of the architecture concealed beneath:

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[2] *An Introduction to Haiku* by Harold G. Henderson, p. 43. The poem is by Matsuo Basho, translated by Henderson.

Yagate shinu
keshiki wa mei-zo
semi-no koe

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Upsetting the Bowl[3]

It is told:

Once Rabbi Elimelekh was eating the Sabbath meal with his disciples. The servant set the soup bowl down before him. Rabbi Elimelekh raised it and upset it, so that the soup poured over the table. All at once young Mendel, later the rabbi of Rymanov, cried out: "Rabbi, what are you doing? They will put us all in jail!" The other disciples smiled at these foolish words. They would have laughed out loud had not the presence of their teacher restrained them. He, however, did not smile. He nodded to young Mendel and said: "Do not be afraid, my son!"

Some time after this, it became known that on that day an edict directed against the Jews of the whole country had been presented to the emperor for his signature. Time after time he took up his pen, but something always happened to interrupt him. Finally he signed the paper. Then he reached for the sand-container but took the inkwell instead and upset it on the document. Hereupon he tore it up and forbade them to put the edict before him again.

A magical action in one part of the world creates its historical action in another—we are dealing with no less than totem and taboo. Psychoanalysis intrudes itself. One of the last, may it be one of the best approaches to modern neurosis is by way of the phenomenological apparatus of anxiety. As we sink into the apathetic bog of our possible extinction, so a breath of the Satanic seems to rise from the swamp. The magic of materials lifts into consciousness, proceeds to dominate us, is even enthroned into a usurpation of consciousness.

The protagonists of *Last Year at Marienbad* are not so much people as halls and chandeliers, gaming tables, cigarettes in their pyramid of 1, 3, 5, and 7. The human characters are ghosts, disembodied servants, attendants who cast their shadows on the material. It is no longer significant that a man carries a silver cigarette case; rather it is the cigarette case which is significant. The man becomes an instrument to transport the case from the breast pocket of a suit into the air; like a building crane, a hand conducts the cigarette case to an angle with the light, fingers

[3] *The Early Masters*, p. 259.

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open the catch and thus elicits a muted sound of boredom, a silver groan from the throat of the case, which now offers up a cigarette, snaps its satisfaction at being shut, and seems to guide the hand back to the breast pocket. The man, on leave until he is called again, goes through a pantomime of small empty activities—without the illumination of his case he is like all dull servants who cannot use their liberty.

That, one may suppose, is a proper portrait of Hell. It is certainly the air of the phenomenological novel. It is as well the neurotic in slavery to the material objects which make up the locks and keys of his compulsion.

But allow me a quick portrait of a neurotic. He is a sociologist, let us say, working for a progressive foundation, a disenchanted atheist ("Who knows—God may exist as some kind of thwarted benevolence"), a liberal, a social planner, a member of SANE, a logical positivist, a collector of jokes about fags and beatniks, a lover of that large suburban land between art and the documentary. He smokes two packs of cigarettes a day: he drinks—*when* he drinks—eight or ten tots of blended whiskey in a night. He does not get drunk, merely cerebral, amusing, and happy. Once when he came home thus drunk, he bowed to his door and then touched his doorknob three times. After this he went to bed and slept like a thief.

Two years later he is in slavery to the doorknob. He must wipe it with his fingertips three times each morning before he goes out. If he forgets to do this and only remembers later at work, his day is shattered. Anxiety bursts his concentration. His psyche has the air of a bombed city. In an extreme case he may even have to return to his home. His first question to himself is whether someone has touched the knob since he left. He makes inquiries. To his horror he discovers the servant has gone out shopping already. She had therefore touched the knob and it has lost its magical property. Stratagems are now necessary. He must devote the rest of the day to encouraging the servant to go out in such a manner that he can open the door for her, and thus remove the prior touch of her hand.

Is he mad? the man asks himself. Later he will ask his analyst the same question. But he is too aware of the absurdity of his activities. He suffers at the thought of the work he is not accomplishing, he hates himself for being attached to the doorknob, he tries to extirpate its dominance.

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One morning he makes an effort to move out briskly. He does not touch the brass a second and third time. But his feet come to a halt, his body turns around as if a gyroscope were revolving him, his arm turns to the knob and pats it twice. He no longer feels his psyche is to be torn in two. Consummate relief.

Of course his analysis discloses wonders. He has been an only son. His mother, his father, and himself make three. He and his wife (a naturally not very happy marriage) have one child. The value of the trinities is considered dubious by the analyst but is insisted upon by the patient. He has found that he need touch the doorknob only once if he repeats to himself, "I was born, I live, and I die."

After a time he finds that he does not have to touch the knob at all, or upon occasion can use his left hand for the purpose. There is a penalty, however. He is obliged to be concerned with the number nine for the rest of the day. Nine sips of water from a glass. A porterhouse steak consumed in nine bites. His wife to be kissed nine times between supper and bed. "I've kicked over an ant hill," he confesses to his analyst. "I'm going bugs."

They work in his cause. Two eyes and one nose makes three; two nostrils and one mouth; the throat, the tongue, and the teeth. His job, his family, and himself. The door, the doorknob, and the act of opening it.

Then he has a revelation. He wakes up one morning and does not reach for a cigarette. There is a tension in him to wait. He suffers agonies—the brightest and most impatient of his cells seem to be expiring without nicotine; still he has intimations of later morning bliss, he hangs on. Like an infantryman coming up alive from a forty-eight hour shelling, he gets to his hat, his attaché case, and the doorknob. As he touches it, a current flows into his hand. "Stick with me, pal," says the message. "One and two keep you from three."

Traveling to the office in the last half hour of the subway rush, he is happy for the first time in years. As he holds to the baked enamel loop of the subway strap, his fingers curl up a little higher and touch the green painted metal above the loop. A current returns to him again. Through his fingertips he feels a psychic topography which has dimensions, avenues, signals, buildings. From the metal of the subway strap through the metal of the subway car, down along the rails, into the tunnels of the city, back to the sewer pipes and electric cables which surround the

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subway station from which he left, back to his house, and up the plumbing, up the steam pipe, up the hall, a leap through the air, and he has come back to the doorknob again. He pats the subway strap three times. The ship of his body will sink no further. "Today," thinks the sociologist, "I signed my armistice. The flag of Faust has been planted here."

But in his office he has palpitations. He believes he will have a heart attack. He needs air. He opens the window, leans out from the waist. By God, he almost jumped!

The force which drew him to touch the knob now seems to want to pull his chest through the window. Or is it a force opposed to the force which made him touch the doorknob? He does not know. He thinks God may be telling him to jump. That thwarted benevolent God. "You are swearing allegiance to materials," says a voice. "Come back, son. It is better to be dead."

Poor man. He is not bold enough to be Faust. He calls his analyst.

"Now, for God's sake, don't do anything," says the analyst. "This is not uncommon. Blocked material is rising to the surface. It's premature, but since we've gotten into it, repetition compulsions have to do with omnipotence fantasies which of course always involve Almighty figures and totemic Satanistic contracts. The urge to suicide is not bona fide in your case—it's merely a symbolic contraction of the anxiety."

"But I tell you I almost went through the window. I felt my feet start to leave the floor."

"Well, come by my office then. I can't see you right now—trust me on this—I've got a girl who will feel I've denied her her real chance to bear children if I cut into her hour, she's had too many abortions. You know, she's touchy"—rare is the analyst who won't gossip a *little* about his patients, it seems to calm the other patients—"but I'll leave an envelope of tranquilizers for you on the desk. They're a new formula. They're good. Take two right away. Then two more this afternoon. Forget the nausea if it comes. Just side-effect. We'll get together this evening."

"Mind if I touch your doorknob three times?"

"Great. You've got your sense of humor back. Yes, touch it."

So soon to die
and no sign of it is showing—
locust cry.

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SEEK HIM IN SHADOWS

by WHIT MASTERSON

(continued from page 42)

Wilson had never before consulted a psychiatrist. He was schooled in an exact science; he viewed a man whose province was the amorphous world of the id and the ego with secret skepticism, a slick salesman of unprovable theories, a combination priest and soothsayer. Dr. Price Kobey surprised him. He was a blunt-spoken, rumpled man in his sixties, with the build of a lumberjack. The bookshelves in his office held more golfing trophies than psychiatric journals.

Slouched in his swivel chair, hands clasped behind his shaggy head, Kobey resembled an amiable bear. "Since we're both giving up lunch for this interview, let's get down to business. From what you told me on the phone, you've got a problem, and her name is Gena Owen."

"I do need some advice, Doctor."

"Who doesn't? From an ethical standpoint, I've got no right to divulge anything about one of my patients. But since Gena has no objections, neither do I. Fire away."

"I don't know quite how to begin."

"Sure you do. You want to know if she actually killed her brother."

"Yes," Wilson admitted. "Did she?"

Kobey didn't reply directly. He said: "To understand Gena, you've got to understand someone else first."

"Her mother? I met her yesterday."

"Still a beautiful woman, isn't she? Don't mind admitting I had quite a crush on her once. I wasn't the only one—but I was the first person she called for after Timothy vanished. However, I was referring to Gena's father. She's as much his daughter as Elinor's, perhaps more." Kobey grimaced absently. "James Clark Owen was an illegitimate child, abandoned at birth, brought up in an orphanage. He came here from Scotland without a penny. He had many of the virtues of the Scots and most of their vices. He was a genius, as you know, immensely gifted, hardworking and dedicated. He was also, as you probably don't know, cold and fanatical and completely lacking in love."

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"I was told he was devoted to his son."

"Timothy was an extension of James Clark Owen's tremendous ego. Not a child, not an individual with his own unique personality, but raw material to be molded in his father's image. That isn't love, Mr. Wilson. Love is tolerant and forgiving. Owen tolerated nothing, forgave nothing. Any deviation from his narrow concepts brought instant and severe punishment. I've never known an unhappier child than Timothy Owen. He was terrified of his father—and for good reason. Elinor only made a bad situation worse. She hated her husband—again for good reason. She got back at him through the boy. There was never a normal mother-son relationship.

"So you can see the stage was set for tragedy," Kobey continued. "Anyone could have predicted it—though not the bizarre form it took. Some men are able to salvage triumph from tragedy, rise cleansed from the ashes. Not James Clark Owen, however. He turned on the surviving members of his family and destroyed them. He placed the entire guilt for the loss of his son upon Elinor and Gena. He dinned it into them until they believed it, and still do today."

"That doesn't make sense. I can see that Elinor Owen might have some reason to feel guilty. But Gena was just a child, five years old when it happened—"

"A very impressionable age. Gena worshipped her father. He was God to her. Ironically, Owen barely acknowledged her existence. His entire attention was concentrated on the boy. Naturally, she was jealous of her brother, the favored child. She wished him dead, as children often do. Suddenly, he *was* dead. So when her father—God—blamed her, Gena believed. With that as a starting point, it became easy for her to assume the guilt for her mother's mental collapse and her father's heart attack as well. Since she inherited her father's dour Scottish theology, she must be punished for her crime. Now, have I answered your original question?"

"I think so. But I've got another one. How can I help Gena get rid of her guilt complex?"

"Don't you already know the answer to that? There's only one way to free Gena. In medieval times, they called it exorcising an evil spirit."

Wilson narrowed his eyes. "You mean, find out what really happened to Timothy. Prove to Gena that she isn't guilty."

"You and I are assuming that her guilt is a delusion. Are you prepared to face the other possibility?" Kobey nodded slowly. "And

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that is, of course, that Gena Owen actually did kill her brother."

Libby answered the door. She looked startled to find him standing there. After a moment, she said coolly, "I seem to recall the face, but the name escapes me."

"May I come in?"

"Why not?"

He said uncomfortably, "Libby, I want to apologize for—well . . ."

"For dropping me like a hot potato? A man doesn't have to apologize for that. It's part of the game. What's bothering you?"

"I *do* need your help," he admitted. Libby waited for him to elaborate, her expression politely receptive. "I'd like to read your story on the Owen boy. It wasn't in this month's issue, so I figured you might still have it around."

"I must say I'm flattered. Also amazed. I supposed you'd have had it all from Gena's own sweet lips by now." Libby shrugged. "Can't oblige. There's no story. I junked it."

"You must have your notes filed away."

"It's possible." She studied him curiously. "This kind of research is a little out of your line, isn't it? What's your angle?"

"I intend to find out what really happened to Timothy Owen."

"What on earth for?"

"Because I want to marry his sister."

"Oh, Rob!" she whispered. "You can't mean that. A sweet guy like you married to her. She'll destroy you."

"Funny thing," he said quietly. "Gena told me the same thing."

From the bottom drawer of the desk, she removed a large brown envelope. "My notes on the Owen case. They're all yours."

He took the envelope awkwardly. "I don't know how to thank you, Libby."

Her mouth quirked in a bitter smile.

"My contribution in lieu of flowers."

"I'm sorry it turned out this way . . ."

"Oh, get out!" she said fiercely, her eyes shut tight as if to hold back tears. "Get out before I start hating you!"

Bob Wilson liked his job with Space Systems and considered himself fortunate to have it. He was almost totally without conceit; it had never occurred to him that his employers might feel equally fortunate. He requested a leave of absence with the secret expectation that he would be fired. To his surprise, it was granted cor-

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dially, without even an inquiry as to the nature of the "personal matters" he gave as a reason. He was free to play detective.

The role was not entirely foreign to him. Much of his work was deductive, seeking the correlation between cause and effect, reasoning from the known to the unknown. Human behavior might be less predictable than, say, the behavior of sub-atomic particles. However, he felt confident that applying the same patient methods would bring him to the truth. He was grateful for Libby's research. Her notes were careful and complete. Without them, he would have been forced to spend days, perhaps weeks, digging out information he was now able to assimilate in an hour.

There were photographs, taken twenty years before, of the principal actors in the drama. They produced in him a wistful sadness, as old photographs often do. A young and beautiful Elinor smiled at him. Gena dimpled sweetly in crisp pinafore and pigtails, holding a doll nearly as large as herself. Timothy, a little gentleman in coat and tie, posed with the glazed, embarrassed grin of a boy who has been told to watch the birdie. Only James Clark Owen seemed to divine the tragic days that lay ahead. The photographer had not been able to coax a smile from his subject. The deep-set eyes glowered at a sinful world; the severe mouth appeared ready to denounce it. Wilson felt that he had seen that face before. When he placed the son beside the father, he realized why. The man was bald; the boy was not. Otherwise, Timothy was a carbon copy of his father. Small wonder that the egotistic Owen had considered the child merely an extension of himself.

The bulk of Libby's material consisted of photocopies of the newspaper accounts of the mystery. The San Ramon *Sun*, in whose backyard it had occurred, provided the most comprehensive coverage. Its stories showed that a good deal of independent investigation had gone into them, in contrast to the larger Los Angeles dailies, which had relied mainly on official handouts. The reporter, a Harold Usher, had stayed with the case longer than his competitors—better than a year, in fact. He had abandoned it reluctantly, to judge by his final column—and with a surprising valedictory.

"Eighteen months after little Timothy Owen vanished," Usher wrote, "we are no closer to a solution than on that first incredible day. Much praise has been heaped on Sheriff Al Scavo and his organization for their efficient investigation. But what of the failure to seal off the area and establish road blocks, particularly during the first critical twenty-four hours? And why were neighboring law

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enforcement agencies alerted so late and the FBI later still, although kidnaping was, and is, a real possibility? Why was the report of the servant, Felix Yakel, of trouble within the Owen family, dismissed by Sheriff Scavo as 'mere gossip'? Why was the image of Timothy as a happy and adored child accepted so readily when the evidence suggests the opposite? It is difficult to shake off the suspicion that the search for the lost boy was bungled, perhaps deliberately. I do not suggest by whom or for what reason. Time may supply the answer when it supplies the answer to the larger question: Where is Timothy Owen?"

Libby had appended a memorandum to herself: *Contact Usher.*

Wilson thought it good advice to follow. The next morning, he drove to San Ramon.

There was no Harold Usher listed in the telephone book or the city directory.

At the *Sun* offices, the blank-faced receptionist was no help, but the managing editor, a hollow-cheeked veteran, gave him precise directions. "Straight out Broadway about five miles. You'll see the sign. Memorial Cemetery."

"You mean Usher's dead?"

"We buried him about eighteen years ago. Damn shame what happened to him."

"What did happen to him?"

"Shot to death in an alley. Cops never did find out who killed him. Maybe they didn't try too hard. Harold was a pain in the neck to a lot of people. Asked embarrassing questions. Know what I mean?"

Wilson had read a generous sample only the night before. "Who was sheriff then—a man named Scavo?"

"You *do* know your ancient history, don't you? Yep, it was Scavo. Been retired a long time now. Bought a farm someplace."

The former sheriff's address was Fallbrook, an agricultural community near San Diego. As he drove south, Wilson thought about the unsolved murder of the reporter, Harold Usher. The curse?

If there was a curse, it had apparently not touched Al Scavo. The man who had headed the search for the missing boy was doing just fine. He owned fifty acres of healthy-looking avocado trees. His home sat among them, a handsome ranch house with adobe walls and split-shake roof. A late-model Lincoln stood in front.

When Wilson rang the bell, a man's voice bellowed from the rear, "Come on around! Gate's open."

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Al Scavo was in the pool. He was an immensely fat man, built like a huge egg. Wilson was reminded of one of his father's picturesque descriptions: "He don't have no head; his neck just haired over." Yet if Scavo was an egg, he was a hard-boiled one. He lumbered up the steps, water pouring off him in a dozen miniature Niagaras, and gave Wilson the casually insolent stare of the veteran lawman.

"What can I do you for, sonny?"

Wilson introduced himself.

Scavo called across the pool, "Hey, Vera—wake up! We got company."

A young woman was dozing on the round canvas sun lounge. She raised her blonde hair, then rose lazily.

"My wife," Scavo said, watching her with obvious satisfaction. Vera was half her husband's age and a third his size, a lithe and voluptuous beauty. They made an incongruous pair.

Vera looked Wilson up and down, smiled languidly and sauntered into the house. Scavo kicked forward a deck chair and invited Wilson to sit while he dabbed at his ponderous body with a towel. "Well, Wilson, what're you selling?"

"I wanted to talk to you about the Timothy Owen case."

Scavo's pudgy hands hesitated an instant before they resumed their brisk movement. "How about that?" he murmured. "Hadn't heard that name in years. Now I hear nothing but. First that gal magazine writer, then you. You a reporter, too?"

"I'm doing sort of a private investigation. Since you were the chief law officer . . ."

"I'll tell you what I told her. I don't want my nose rubbed in it no more. I'm just a private citizen who likes his privacy. The whole story's on the record."

"I have read it," Wilson said, surprised at the hostile tone. "Obviously, it isn't the whole story. It doesn't tell what happened to the boy."

"Of course it doesn't—because nobody knows. If you want my personal opinion, I think a mountain lion got him."

"I understand there weren't any mountain lions in that area."

"I said it was my personal opinion," Scavo replied. "Take it or leave it."

Wilson felt himself growing angry at the other man's rudeness. "Then let's go on to another question. A reporter who followed the

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story—Harold Usher—suggested that there'd been some sort of cover-up."

"Harold Usher." Scavo's lips writhed as if the name tasted bitter. "That dirty little skunk was out to smear me. Hadn't been for him, I might still be sheriff up there."

"What's your personal opinion of his murder? Another mountain lion?"

"Sonny, you listen to me," Scavo said softly. "I was a cop before you were born. And a damn tough one. Don't come playing detective around me, trying to stir up trouble—or I'll give you trouble like you never seen."

Wilson mused. "You have a nice life, Mr. Scavo. I never realized that the law was such a lucrative profession."

Scavo studied him with cold, beady eyes. "I had a piece of property down in Texas. Turned out to be sitting on top of a few million barrels of oil. Now get lost, boy."

Wilson stood up with a sigh. "You know more about losing boys than I, Sheriff. I prefer to find them."

He had plenty of time to reflect on the interview during the long drive home. Scavo's hostility might be rooted in nothing more than resentment at being reminded of past failure. Just as his surprising affluence might be rooted in nothing more than a lucky oil strike. But there was another possibility for both his hostility and his affluence: That Scavo knew more about the disappearance of Timothy Owen than he would reveal, and that someone, for some reason, had paid him to keep it that way.

Harold Usher had hinted at a similar theory in his final column. And had died mysteriously in an alley shortly afterward. It was a sobering thought.

He had not talked to Gena in two days. He phoned to suggest dinner. She hesitated a long time before agreeing to meet him in Beverly Hills.

When she arrived to keep their date, she wore a guilty look. "I promised myself that I wasn't going to see you again."

"That'll make for a strange sort of marriage, won't it?"

"You know I shouldn't marry you, Rob."

"I'm making progress. Sunday, it was 'won't.' Tonight, it's 'shouldn't.' That gives me hope for tomorrow."

She eyed him pensively. "Do you really believe there's a tomorrow for us?"

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"A bright and shining one, free of old shadows." While they ate, he told her what he had been doing the past two days. "And I'm only getting warmed up. Before I'm finished, I'm going to know exactly what happened to your brother."

Gena toyed with her salad, gaze averted. "It might be better not to know."

"Isn't it always better to know? Ignorance isn't bliss, despite what they say." He nudged her knee until she looked at him. "I can guess what morbid thoughts are running through that odd little mind. Forget them, honey. Whatever happened up there in the mountains twenty years ago, wasn't what you've imagined."

"How can you be sure?" she murmured. "I hated Timothy. Even today—after so many years—that's all I remember about him. How I hated him."

"Sibling hatred, I'll accept. But not sibling murder."

"Haven't you ever seen a child tear her doll to pieces in a fit of temper? She may cry afterward, but the doll is destroyed. We all carry violence in us, Rob, from the cradle to the grave."

He removed his glasses and rubbed his eyes. "I'm getting another headache. All right. Just for the sake of argument, let's suppose that in some way you were responsible for Timothy's death. You were still only five years old. Basically, you're as innocent as I am."

Gena said lightly, "You look like another person without your glasses, Rob. I like it. Have you ever considered contact lenses?"

"Don't evade the subject, lady. It's okay for you to feel sorry for Timothy—"

"You don't understand me at all," she interrupted with a flash of anger. "I don't feel sorry for what happened to Timothy. I'd do it again. I'd do it now, this minute, and smile all the way to the gas chamber." Her fingers clenched on the bone handle of her steak knife. "It's what I did to my father and my mother—that's the guilt I live with! But not Timothy."

"Does that make any real difference—if I can prove that you weren't responsible?"

She said slowly, "You can beat me down with logic, the way my father used to. I'm like my mother, all unreasoning emotion. But what I feel, I feel deeply." She clasped his hand fiercely. "Don't open old graves, Rob. I'm afraid of what might happen to you if you keep on with this."

"I must look awfully delicate. Everyone predicts trouble for me. Even Sheriff Scavo."

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"I remember him," she said with a shudder. "He came to the house several times. A big man with fat hands. He used to bring me presents that I'd throw away as soon as he left."

"How come?"

"I didn't like him." Gena hesitated. "I thought he was a little too cozy with Mother. And, of course, what he did to poor Felix—a servant we had at the time—"

"Felix Yakel? Exactly what did Scavo do to poor Felix?"

"I'm not sure. They went away together, and when Felix came back, he was all bruised and bleeding. He told me he had fallen down and hurt himself. I was just a child, so I believed him. Later, I wondered if Scavo hadn't beaten him up."

However, she could advance no reason for it, and Wilson chose not to press the point. Gena was already tense and snappish. She realized her mood. After dinner when he suggested a show, she begged off.

"I'm lousy company tonight, Rob. I can't even stand myself."

"How will you ever endure not seeing me?" he teased. "I'll be busy, of course. But you, all alone in that big house . . ."

"I intend to paint up a storm. It's the best way I know to clear out the cobwebs."

Of all the principal actors in the Owen tragedy, the character of Felix Yakel was the most nebulous to judge by Libby's research material. Even his picture was fuzzy. He was part of the background of a family snapshot. His saturnine face, half-shadowed by a chauffeur's cap, regarded the camera sullenly over the heads of the two children, like a resentful animal being forced to perform for his supper. Libby had noted:

Fired shortly after disappearance, reason unknown. Alcoholic, frequent arrests for vagrancy and disorderly conduct. Hints he knows something, won't say what, probably doesn't. Persecution complex, blame-the-world syndrome. Unreliable witness.

There was an address, a run-down rooming house in the slums of East Los Angeles. Libby had interviewed him there. Wilson, attempting to do likewise, found that Felix Yakel had been evicted ten days earlier.

"Try the park," the landlady advised unsympathetically. "That's where most of the winos hang out."

The block-square clearing was a miniature Sargasso Sea which gathered to it the neighborhood's human derelicts. It was dotted

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with mournful palm trees and overflowing trash cans.

Wilson's inquiries met with suspicion. Most of the men assumed he was a police officer, despite his denials. Experience had taught them that no one was interested in their existence, save the law. Only a few would admit to knowing Yakel, and those merely because they were curious as to the charges against him. None would admit to knowing his present whereabouts.

Wilson passed out cards with his telephone number. "I'll pay fifty dollars to the man who finds Felix Yakel for me." He expected the reward might produce the missing servant faster than even a police dragnet. After all, fifty dollars was the equivalent of one hundred bottles of wine.

He lunched at a drive-in on Wilshire Boulevard and went back to his apartment to wait, only to discover that someone was waiting for him. A stocky young man with crew-cut hair was punching his doorbell impatiently. He stopped when he saw Wilson emerge from the elevator.

"Afternoon, Mr. Wilson."

He was vaguely familiar, but Wilson couldn't place him. "I'm sorry, I feel I should know you. I seem to recall—"

"You should. I'm Douglas Braddock."

In daylight—and sober—Gena's amorous companion appeared a far more substantial citizen than at their previous encounter on the beach. He wore an air of brisk purpose.

Wondering what that purpose might be, Wilson said awkwardly, "I owe you an apology. Matter of fact, I tried to look you up afterward, but you'd gone."

"Nothing lost. I left myself wide open. I always have where Gena's concerned." Doug regarded him appraisingly. "I wouldn't mind trying you on again for size one of these days, though, under better conditions. Should be a pretty even bout."

"Well, you know where I live." Since the other man didn't seem disposed toward an immediate rematch, Wilson asked, "What can I do for you in the meantime?"

"You can talk to me."

Wilson let him into the apartment and offered him a drink. Doug declined.

"This may surprise you, but I'm not much of a drinker. The other night was an exception." He walked about the room like a prospective tenant before settling in the easy chair. "Nice place. I understand you're one of these scientific geniuses."

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"Junior grade. And you?"

"Legal eagle, also junior grade. Braddock, Smith, Finsterwald and Braddock. I'm the Braddock on the tail end. My father was James Clark Owen's attorney, executor, and trustee of his estate. I've been handling it since my father's death. Now that we've gotten that cleared up, suppose you tell me what the hell you're doing with Gena."

"It's none of your damn business."

"I'm her attorney, practically her guardian. That makes it my business. Besides which, I'm in love with her and have been for years."

"That's too bad. Because I'm going to marry her."

"You've hypnotized her into believing that you can solve all her problems by finding out what happened to her brother. You're building her up to a letdown she won't be able to cope with. She'll shatter into a million pieces."

"I happen to be in love with her, too. Isn't that obvious?"

Contemplating the ceiling, Doug said, "I ran an investigation on you. Poor farm boy, loaded with talent, but without two dimes to rub together. Worked your way through college pumping gas. Well thought of by your present employers, but still just a hired hand. And still poor. No savings even on a fairly decent salary. Am I right?"

Wilson smiled thinly. "As far as you go. There's more. My folks' farm had a big mortgage. I finally paid it off this spring."

"The man who marries Gena marries approximately two-and-a-half million bucks. Enough to pay off a lot of mortgages. Maybe even more important to an ambitious young scientist, he also gains control of the Owen Corporation. Acres of factories and laboratories to putter around in for the rest of his life, while he gives free play to his genius."

"Sounds as if you've given it a lot of thought, Braddock. From purely unselfish motives, I'm sure. By the way, how's your savings account?"

"Gena's money doesn't make her any less attractive to me," Doug admitted frankly. "But I'd marry her if she took in laundry. We're the same kind of people, she and I. I can make her happy, because I'll accept her as she is."

"So would I. But she won't accept herself. She never will, not until her brother's ghost is laid to rest."

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"I'll give you credit for being sincere, Wilson. Even your ex-girl friend—that good-looking redhead—wouldn't say a nasty word about you. But sincere or not, call this thing off before it's too late."

"It's already too late. Twenty years."

Doug got to his feet. "Then you've got to be stopped," he said softly. "One way or another, you've got to be stopped."

The telephone finally rang at four o'clock. A male voice Wilson didn't recognize husked, "You the guy who'll pay fifty clams for Yakel? I know where he is." The caller wasn't willing to divulge the information over the phone.

Wilson asked where they might meet; the man named a downtown intersection.

"Bring the cash in small bills. If I break anything bigger than a fiver those stew bums'll be all over me, chiseling in."

Wilson was at the rendezvous within twenty minutes. Five minutes later, he and the informant parted, mutually satisfied. Thirty minutes after that, Wilson was conferring with an intern on the fifth floor of the huge county hospital.

"His prognosis is unfavorable," the intern told Wilson indifferently. "We're treating Yakel for pneumonia, because we can generally cure pneumonia. But we can't cure cirrhosis of the liver, and that's his real problem. Like all these old rumdums, he has poisoned his body for years."

"May I talk to him, Doctor?"

"Let's put it this way. Nothing is going to hurt him now."

Felix Yakel occupied a screened-off corner of a large ward. The former servant was just a fading shadow of the young man in the family snapshot. His skin was jaundiced, his hair white, his teeth discolored or missing. Though only in his fifties, he looked thirty years older.

He was awake, but showed no interest in his visitor. However, when Wilson explained his mission, some measure of comprehension returned to the sunken eyes.

"Timothy Owen," he murmured. "Reckon I could tell you something about that, all right, if I was a mind to."

"That's why I came, Mr. Yakel—to hear your story."

"Hushed it up pretty good between them. But they didn't fool me."

"Who do you mean by 'they'?"

A look of fear crossed Yakel's face. "Nobody. Don't pay no attention to what I said."

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"Who are you afraid of?"

"Go away," Yakel mumbled, closing his eyes. "Leave me be."

Wilson meant to pry out the story, and cruelty was his only lever. "You're dying, Yakel," he said sharply. "Whatever you're hiding, now's the time to get it off your chest. What happened to Timothy Owen?"

There was a long silence. Finally, Yakel opened his eyes. His expression was a strange blend of surprise and contentment, as if for the first time he realized that he had nothing mortal to fear.

"What happened to Timothy Owen?" Wilson repeated.

"He was murdered," Yakel said slowly. "She hated him, you know, and she waited for her chance. Then, when Mr. Owen was asleep, it finally come."

A chill dread clutched his throat. "She?"

Yakel's eyes were fixed blankly on something long ago and far away. "She didn't fool me none. She was hard and cruel. Wasn't nothing she wouldn't do to hurt Mr. Owen. Running after other men, throwing away his money on herself. He beat her for it often enough. But that she-devil finally saw a way to pay him back."

Wilson let out a shudder of relief. Yakel was speaking of the mother.

"I guessed right off what she done," Yakel went on in a weary voice. "I tried to tell Sheriff Scavo how it was. First, he just laughed. Then, after she'd been at him, he took me away and beat me up, hurt me bad. Said if I so much as breathed another word, he'd pin the rap on me. Said I'd never live to stand trial. He'd see to that."

Wilson did not dispute the other man's sincerity. Obviously, Scavo had frightened Yakel badly. The sheriff was a brutal man; he would have found the weak and slow-witted Yakel easy to manipulate. The question was: Why?

He asked it.

"Scavo knew," Yakel muttered. "He must have found the little boy where she buried him. In the cellar, I reckon. But she bought him off with her body, paid him to keep it quiet. That's how come they ganged up on me." Tears welled in the sunken eyes. "I didn't have no chance against them two! I wasn't no blackmailer, the way she called me! They was the bad ones, not me! And now I'm gonna die! I'm gonna die!"

He was nearly screaming, thrashing about on the narrow bed. But for the restraining rails, he would have fallen to the floor. A nurse came and flung aside the curtain.

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She gave Wilson a disapproving stare. "You'll have to leave." And to Yakel, soothingly, "Let's take it easy now. How will you ever get well, carrying on like this?"

However, Yakel was still screaming, as Wilson left, that he was going to die. He was undoubtedly right—and soon. Add one more life to the number the vanished boy had shattered. Yet perhaps the addition was unfair, Wilson reflected. Felix Yakel, like the rest—with the possible exception of Gena—carried within himself the seeds of his own destruction. Timothy Owen had been the catalyst, not the cause.

How much of Yakel's story could be believed? Certainly, Al Scavo had a taste for beautiful women and expensive living. Twenty years ago, Elinor Owen had been both beautiful and rich. It was possible that the sheriff had merely used his power to shut up a vindictive rumormonger. It was equally possible that Scavo was a crooked cop who had seized his golden opportunity. A dangerous game—but who was in a better position to pull it off than the chief investigating officer?

There were only two persons still alive who knew the truth. One was Al Scavo, who would not speak. The other was Elinor Owen, who could not—unless she might be persuaded to open the lock which held her memory captive. A difficult assignment, but, for Gena's sake, worth attempting. He telephoned Dr. Kobey to enlist his help.

"I'm afraid it's impossible," the psychiatrist interrupted before Wilson could complete his explanation. "I thought Gena told you. Obviously you haven't heard."

"Heard what?"

"Elinor has been very distraught since your visit last Sunday. Her worst setback in several years. Gena and I were called to the sanitarium this morning. I thought I'd succeeded in calming her down. But this afternoon she ran away."

"Ran away? How? Where did she go?"

"Nobody's sure. She may have hidden in some visitor's car. At any rate, we haven't found her. The police are looking, too. I'm frankly stumped. I can't imagine where she could have gone."

"I can," Wilson said slowly. "To look for her son, Timothy."

His headlights picked out the sign: PRIVATE ROAD—NO ADMITTANCE. Wilson pulled off the highway and studied the map. The

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Owen lodge lay approximately eleven miles northwest of the little mountain community of Bonner. The odometer indicated that he had traveled nearly that distance. There were no other turnoffs nearby; this had to be the one he sought.

The old road was rutted and in bad repair. Weeds clawed at the underside of the automobile as he sent it creeping cautiously forward. The chaparral near the highway soon surrendered to thickets of mesquite and manzanita taller than a man. These in turn were dwarfed by the forest—firs and alders and lofty pines. He forded a stream bed, little more than damp sand after the long, dry season, skirted a shallow canyon and saw at last the lodge, looming large and ominous above him.

The Owen summer house was as neglected as the road which led to it. Vandals had broken its windows and scrawled their names upon its walls. The rain had nibbled at the stone foundation, the wind had stolen many of the weathered shingles, and the forest had sought to bury what remained under a brown blanket of pine needles. Once, the lodge had been a pleasant retreat, a rich man's pride. Today, it was a crumbling ruin, as melancholy as the abandoned temple of some forgotten race.

And as devoid of human life. When he turned off the engine, there was no sound save the ticking of the dashboard clock. Wilson circled the lodge on foot, scrutinizing the exterior with the aid of a flashlight, then entered through a window and prowled among the empty rooms. If he had been correct in guessing at Elinor Owen's intended destination, he had reached it before her. However, it now appeared more likely that his original concept was in error.

Or was he really alone? Wilson was not a superstitious man; his universe was a rational one in which ghosts did not exist. Yet he felt a strange uneasiness in this place. Something was stirring in his subconscious, something inexplicable and terrifying, a whisper of welcome and of warning. *I've been waiting for you . . .*

He glanced about sharply, then forced a sheepish grin. He was allowing his imagination to spook him. The house held no one except himself, alive or dead. He had examined every room, explored every hiding place . . .

"The cellar," he murmured. "I forgot the cellar."

To reach it, he was compelled to leave the house. In the rear, adjacent to the service porch, steps descended to the basement. They were covered with a door whose hinges creaked when he lifted it. Wilson aimed his flashlight into the greater darkness below and

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followed the beam down the concrete stairs. The room was not the conventional basement familiar to Middle Westerners. It was, more accurately, an excavation, barely head high. The floor was dirt, and no attempt had been made to beautify the rough walls. Storage, rather than additional living space, was its purpose. Twenty years of cobwebs festooned the beams, and the air had the musty stench of an old tomb. If Yakel was right, "tomb" was an apt description.

However, he found no evidence to support Yakel's accusation. The earthen floor was hard-packed. The little boy's body might indeed be hidden beneath it; if so, only wholesale digging would reveal it. Wilson wasn't prepared to tackle the job at this point, if ever. His subconscious was nudging him again, seeking to surface, telling him that the true fate of Timothy Owen would not be uncovered by shovels. Once more, he could almost sense a ghostly presence, almost hear an imploring voice: *Not here, not here, follow me . . .*

With a shudder, he turned toward the stairs—and halted, his heart pounding. From somewhere outside the house came a noise that was neither a ghost nor his imagination. It was the crunch of gravel made by human feet bearing the weight of a human body. The steps drew closer, then stopped.

Since the glow of his flashlight was plainly visible through the open cellar door, Wilson saw no value in concealment. He sprang up the stairs. "Who's there?" he called loudly. "Mrs. Owen! Is that you?"

He heard the shot at the same instant that he felt its impact. An invisible fist struck him in the pit of the stomach, driving the air from his lungs. He lurched backward, striking his head on the jamb, and tumbled down the steps to a jarring collision with the ground beneath.

Wilson was not sure how long he lay there, dazed. He tasted dirt and discovered that his face was pressed against gritty earth, but could not recall why. When he attempted to sit up, the pain in his stomach brought back memory with a rush. He had been shot; he was probably dying. Yet his fingers found no blood. His flesh, though throbbing, was intact. He was not mortally wounded. In fact, aside from a few cuts and bruises, he didn't appear to be wounded at all. His bewildered mind sought to comprehend the miracle.

The flashlight was still glowing. He crawled across the cellar to retrieve it and, with it, learned the reason for his survival. The bullet, probably small-caliber, had struck the old-fashioned belt

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buckle that had been a present from his father. The metal was badly dented, and the embossed initial unrecognizable. The assassin's aim had been good; only the square inch of steel had saved Wilson's life.

"Wonder why he didn't finish me off?" Wilson muttered. Since murder had been the intent, it was odd that the assassin had failed to administer the coup de grâce to his helpless victim.

His nostrils detected a new odor, not the musty aroma of the cellar, but the unmistakable, acrid smell of smoke. He understood the assassin's apparent oversight. The lodge was on fire! The flames were intended to complete the execution and to destroy the evidence as well.

In sudden panic, Wilson scrambled up the steps. The cellar door was closed now and barred from the outside. All his frantic shoving could not budge it. Smoke was beginning to seep through the floor boards, making him cough. The boards were hot to the touch. Soon the cellar would become an oven. The super-heated air would sear his lungs, killing him long before the fire itself reached his body. He was trapped.

The vent hole, the voice whispered in his ear. As if reminded of something that he had forgotten, he felt an immense surge of relief. Drawn by some unexplainable magnetism, he ran the length of the cellar. At the far end, he saw what he had not seen previously—a small, rectangular opening where foundation and sub-flooring met. The hole, covered with a rusty mesh, was intended to provide cross ventilation. He knocked the screen away with one blow and pulled himself through the narrow aperture. The heat from the burning house scorched his back through his clothing as he staggered to his feet.

Run for your life! the voice commanded.

Seized by a terror he had never known, Robert Wilson plunged blindly into the blackness, running desperately from the evil that sought to destroy him.

It was long past midnight when he drove up to the old mansion on the palisades above the Pacific. Behind him, he left a raging blaze which the fire-fighting crews had managed to contain in time to save the surrounding forest. Ahead of him lay another sort of inferno. He could only pray that he also would be in time.

His death tonight was intended to close forever the book on Timothy Owen, the book which, after twenty years, he had insisted upon reopening. It had become necessary to someone that Wilson be

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erased. Someone, goaded by desperation, had trailed him to the mountain lodge. Al Scavo, who had threatened him with violence? Doug Braddock, who had vowed to stop his meddling? Elinor Owen, who was perhaps already a murderess? Any, or none of them.

One fact became increasingly clear as he sped down the seemingly endless freeway toward the city. If there was a choice of assassins, there was also a choice of victims. Gena shared his knowledge. That meant she shared his danger. He stopped to telephone, but received no answer, which increased his anxiety. The assassin had an hour's head start.

The upper corners of the big house glowed with light as he wheeled his car into the curving driveway. Wilson sighed with relief. Gena's studio. Engrossed in her work, she had not heard, or had chosen to ignore, the telephone.

He rang the bell, then tried the door. It was locked. He pounded on the panel.

"Gena!" he shouted. "Open up! It's me, Rob! Are you all right? Gena!"

The echo of her name was the only reply.

Thoroughly alarmed, he sprinted around the house, seeking an unlocked door or open window. He heard the muffled purr of an idling engine. The sound emanated from the darkness of the detached garage, but the automobile was concealed behind the lowered door. Wilson flung up the door with a resounding crash. He was enveloped by a swirling gray mist that stung his eyes and clogged his throat.

Putting his handkerchief to his face, he plunged into the deadly cloud that poured from the exhaust pipe. He jerked open the car door and turned off the ignition. Gena lay huddled on the front seat, eyes closed and arms folded peacefully as if for slumber. But it appeared to be the sleep in which there are no dreams and from which there is no awakening.

Wilson scooped up the limp figure and carried it into the life-giving air. *You're too late*, his despairing mind told him. *She's gone.* Then he imagined he detected a shudder convulsing her body. While it might be only the last faint spasm of life departing, he took fresh hope.

The service entrance was unlocked. He bore the girl upstairs through the darkness, leaping the stairs two at a time, and placed her upon her bed. Her face was colorless, her skin cold, but—it was not his imagination now—she was breathing. Feebly, almost reluc-

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tantly, she was fighting her way back from death. She needed help, more than he could supply alone.

He seized the telephone and told the operator, "I want an ambulance. And for God's sake—hurry!"

While waiting for the ambulance to arrive, he wrapped her in blankets and looked around for a stimulant to administer. "Something hot," he muttered. Gena kept a coffee pot perking in her studio while she worked. Since she had apparently been painting this evening . . . He ran hastily down the hall.

Engrossed in saving Gena's life, he had not paused to consider that they might not be alone in the house. Elinor Owen was standing in the middle of the studio, staring at the canvas on the large easel. She wore soiled slacks and a pullover sweater and her hair was bound by a ribbon. From her hand dangled a twenty-two caliber pistol.

She turned slowly toward Wilson. Showing no surprise at his presence, she said, "She's dead, isn't she? Now they're all dead."

"Gena's alive." He moved toward her cautiously, watching the hand that held the pistol. "She's going to live, Mrs. Owen."

"They're all dead," Elinor repeated. "You're dead, too. One by one. And now there's no one left except me."

"Give me the gun," he said gently.

She regarded the weapon with a puzzled frown, as if surprised to find it in her hand. She did not resist when he removed it. Wilson sniffed the barrel; the pistol had been fired recently.

Elinor was gazing once more at the painting on the easel. "It's been such a long time," she murmured. "I couldn't picture him, hard as I tried. But now I can at last."

Gena had been working on a portrait of her father. Wilson recognized James Clark Owen immediately, although the bald upper third of the head was still unfinished. It was a more flattering representation than the newspaper photograph, a kinder and younger face, but there was no mistaking the deep-set brooding eyes and resolute mouth. Lacking a model, Gena had drawn upon her memory, mixing her paints with love, to convey the man minus the terrible arrogance, the destructive pride.

And suddenly, the subconscious voice was no longer a whisper but a scream, louder than the siren of the ambulance turning into the driveway. He knew. Not yet why, not yet how—but at last he knew what had happened to Timothy Owen.

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The ambulance took Gena to the hospital. Three days later, it returned her, still in a weakened condition but definitely alive, with Dr. Kobey in anxious attendance.

Wilson was at the mansion to meet her. Doug Braddock was present at Wilson's suggestion and also Al Scavo, although the former sheriff's initial reaction had been a point-blank refusal. Curiosity, or something more, had caused him to reconsider.

When they gathered in the upstairs studio, even James Clark Owen was present in a sense, in the unfinished portrait whose brooding eyes dominated the room. Of those who had known the missing boy or had in some fashion been touched by his fate, only two were absent: Elinor Owen, who had been returned to her confinement, and Felix Yakel, who had mercifully been released from his at last.

Kobey drew Wilson aside. "Can't this be postponed?" he asked in a low voice. "Gena's still a sick girl. Her memory is confused. She can't tell you what happened the other night, because she doesn't know. As a doctor, I strongly advise you wait."

"Gena doesn't have to tell me what happened. And as for waiting, this thing has already waited twenty years. It's time to finish it."

The psychiatrist shrugged. "I've registered my professional objection. If you insist on going ahead despite it, I can't stop you."

Wilson crossed to the chaise longue where Gena lay. Her eyes were on the portrait, and she started when he took her hands. "Dr. Kobey doesn't think you're well enough to hear the truth," he said gently. "I think that the truth will make you well. Will you trust me?"

"Rob," she murmured. "Are you all right? I had such terrible nightmares, and when I woke up and you weren't there . . ."

"I stayed with you until you were out of danger. After that, there was something I had to do."

Scavo growled, "You dragged me all the way up here. Suppose you tell me what kind of clambake you're throwing."

"I suppose you could call it an inquest," Wilson said quietly. "An inquest into what happened to a little boy twenty years ago. And also what happened to Gena and to me three nights ago. They go together. They're part of the same chain reaction."

They were silent, watching him.

Wilson said, "Let's take the last first, work backward to the beginning. The other night at the lodge, someone shot at me, tried to kill me and almost succeeded. The same night—well, you all know

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how close Gena came to dying in the garage. We were both lucky. We were both meant to die, and for the same reason—to close the book forever on the mystery of Timothy Owen. So I asked myself: Who had the strongest reason for wanting it closed?"

"The one who knew the truth about Timothy," Kobey said slowly.

"Yes. But who *did* know the truth about Timothy? There were several possibilities—including you, Doctor. You were in love with Elinor Owen. You could have known that she murdered her son. You might even have helped her."

Kobey shook his head, his expression ruefully amused, and didn't reply.

Wilson went on, "Then there's you, Sheriff—a man who could have discovered what happened to the boy and profited handsomely from it. Your sort of man might be willing to kill, even after twenty years, to protect himself."

Scavo regarded him beadily. "Seems to me I heard the same sort of lies from another lying mouth, once upon a time."

"You mean Felix Yakel. And you're right. They were lies. Yakel was a resentful and vindictive man with a grudge against his employer's wife, probably sex-based. He told his lies so long, he finally came to believe them himself. No, Sheriff, you may have things on your conscience—including that reporter, Harold Usher—but Timothy Owen isn't one of them. Your crime was incompetence. You gave more thought to chasing Elinor than to chasing her son."

"She wasn't nothing but a tease," Scavo said with a shrug. "All promise and no delivery. But I didn't lose any sleep over her, sonny."

Doug said angrily, "Damned if I can see the excuse for airing this dirty linen now. Get to the point. It was Elinor, wasn't it? The poor woman was out of her mind. Something drove her to murder Timothy twenty years ago—and something drove her to attempt murder again the other night." He put an apologetic hand on Gena's shoulder. "I'm sorry, doll. Try to remember she's not really responsible for any of it."

"That's exactly right," Wilson said. "Elinor isn't really responsible for any of it. Not because she's insane, but because she's innocent." He looked at the girl on the chaise longue. "Isn't that right, Gena?"

With an effort, she tore her gaze from the oil painting. "I don't know," she said faintly. "I can't remember."

"I think you can. I think you began to remember a few minutes ago, when you looked at this unfinished picture." In an unemotional voice, he went on, "You were the person who tried to kill me, Gena.

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You thought you had killed me. Elinor was here when you got back. You told her what you had done and threw down the pistol, which she was holding when I found her. And then you went down to the garage and sat in your car and tried to kill yourself."

Doug sprang forward, his face pale. "What kind of trick are you pulling? What are you trying to do, drive her crazy?"

"Sit down, Tarzan," the former sheriff advised softly. "This is just getting juicy."

Kobey, frowning, said, "I take it that you've adopted Gena's own theory that she *did* kill Timothy twenty years ago and . . ."

"She didn't kill Timothy. Nobody killed Timothy. Timothy isn't dead."

Blank incredulity was reflected on every face that stared at him. Except Gena; she closed her eyes and bowed her head.

Someone faltered. "But if he isn't dead, where is he?"

"He grew up." Wilson touched the portrait lightly. "This isn't a picture of James Clark Owen. It's a picture of his son, as he looks today." With a stick of charcoal, he rapidly shaded in a receding hairline upon the bald head, placed the outline of hornrim spectacles before the brooding eyes. "I'm not much of an artist, but you should recognize him—as Gena did the other night. It's my picture. You see, I'm Timothy Owen."

The lodge had burned to the ground. Only the blackened stones of the chimney still towered skyward, like the marker above a grave.

Libby, sitting beside him in the car, said quietly, "I should think this is the last place in the world you'd care to visit."

"I wanted one final look," he said. "Or maybe he wanted it. I'm not sure."

"He?"

"Timothy. He came back to me here the other night, as if he'd been waiting for me. He got me out of the cellar by showing me that vent. I didn't even know it was there. But, of course, a kid knows all the nooks and crannies of a house the way a grownup never does. And when I ran in a blind panic, I ran for the road, just as he did twenty years ago. I was Timothy again, running for my life."

"How much of it do you actually remember, Rob?"

"There'll always be blank spaces, naturally. Mostly I remember the fear, the awful terror. I had sinned. Mother would tell Father, and Father would punish me again. He used to whip me until I bled. But the worst of it was how he looked at me—those eyes that seemed

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to shrivel my soul. Weighing me, finding me wanting. So I ran away. I started down the road. God knows where I was heading. There was a sound behind me, something coming at me very rapidly . . ."

Libby nodded. "The Wilsons' car."

"Pop"—he hesitated—"he's still Pop to me. He was looking over his shoulder, as scared as I was. He'd broken into a filling station and taken some money from the cash register to buy food for Mom. He didn't see me until the car hit me."

"It's a wonder you weren't killed."

"I guess I came pretty close to dying. If the Wilsons had abandoned me . . . But they didn't. Pop searched around and couldn't find anybody I belonged to. So he put me in the car, intending to leave me with the first doctor."

"Why didn't he?"

"The nearest town was Bonner. There was one doctor there, and he'd locked up for the Fourth. Pop drove on, not able to find anyone he could leave me with. The farther he drove, the easier it was to keep driving. He was in a pretty desperate situation. He'd already committed burglary. Now he'd run down and maybe killed a little boy. And, of course, he wasn't thinking very clearly at that time, anyway."

"Still, to take a child . . ."

"It was very wrong," he agreed. "I can't deny that. But after talking to them—after I flew back home the other night and made them tell me the truth—I can understand it. I can understand them. Zach Wilson was a shiftless drunk, an illiterate migrant farm hand. Mae Wilson was barely out of her teens, married at fourteen, a mother at fifteen. Their son, the real Robert Wilson, had died a few days before, and she could never have another. Mae was sick, too, with the same fever that killed the boy—typhoid, I think—and nearly out of her mind with grief. The child hadn't gotten proper medical attention because Zach was off on a bender. Pop told me that Mom kept praying over and over for God to give back her baby. Suddenly, there I was, the same age as their Robert, a little boy without a name and without a memory. Pop says that she held me in her arms and wouldn't let me go, kept calling me Robbie. Robbie . . . And do you know what my first words were?" He paused, then said softly, " 'I love you.'

"Then the Owen case became that year's crime of the century. They were guilty of kidnaping. Taking me back meant prison. But

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that wasn't the real reason they kept me. I had actually become their son. I responded to their love, the love my own parents had never given me. I *was* Robert Wilson."

"It's strange that you never remembered who you were."

"The accident fractured my skull. But full and permanent amnesia is pretty rare without extensive brain damage, which I didn't have. It's Kobey's theory that I could have remembered eventually—but that I didn't want to. Timothy was a desperately unhappy child. The accident gave his subconscious mind the opportunity to escape. The Wilsons took me back to Missouri, explained my condition with the story about my falling into a threshing machine." He shook his head pensively. "You know what they say about an ill wind. Timothy's disappearance destroyed one family—or maybe they were on the road to destruction already. It was the making of another. Pop never touched another drop. Robert Wilson was a poor farm boy, but far richer than Timothy Owen would have been."

"If your company hadn't transferred you to California . . ."

"And if you hadn't dragged me to that particular party . . . But I wonder if I wouldn't have found out anyway, sooner or later. Blood will tell. I followed in James Clark Owen's footsteps with the career I chose. In five years, my hair will be gone. I'll be as bald as he was. Someone would have seen the resemblance. The way Elinor saw it that afternoon at the sanitarium. The way Gena saw it in the painting."

He sighed. "Poor, lost Gena. We were attracted to each other so immediately. We felt we belonged together somehow, but we didn't understand why. Again, it was the call of the blood. Being more perceptive, she sensed the potential disaster in it, where I didn't, and she held back. I'm sure now she never would have married me. We don't have to feel guilty about anything. I'll always be grateful to her for that."

"She tried to kill you," Libby reminded him harshly.

"She tried to kill Timothy," he corrected. "There's a difference. Gena told me once that she could see the truth when she painted. The first time she did my portrait, she wouldn't accept the truth she saw and destroyed the canvas. The second time . . .

"She hated Timothy. She felt responsible for his death and had done penance for it all her life. Suddenly, he was back. The shock was more than she could take. Kobey told her I'd gone to the lodge. She followed me—not Robert Wilson, but Timothy Owen, who had to be destroyed finally and completely. Then she sentenced herself

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to death for his murder. The garage was to be her gas chamber. Luckily, I got there in time."

After a while, Libby asked, "What happens to her now—and to everyone?"

"We can't go back, any of us, only forward. I'll never see Gena again. She's welcome to the Owen money. I don't want it. I think she has a chance to be happy at last, maybe with Doug. Elinor's past saving. I feel sorry for her, but she's no more my mother today than she was twenty years ago. The Wilsons—well, I still love them and always will. The world will go on wondering, but the case of Timothy Owen is closed."

"And you?" Libby inquired softly. "What happens to you?"

He was silent for a time. "I don't know. I'm not even sure who I am. Robert Wilson is buried in some forgotten grave. Timothy Owen is just as dead. I'm both of them—and neither. I'm nobody."

"You're the man I love," she murmured, leaning her head against his shoulder.

"I don't even have a name to offer you."

"Twenty years ago—not very far from here—you woke up to a new and happy life in the arms of a woman who wanted you. Do you remember your first words?"

"I love you," he whispered.

"Keep saying them," she told him gently. "It will happen again."

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a *NEW* crime story by

PATRICIA MOYES

first publication in the United States

"The Max Scotland murder was a classic"—in the Golden Age tradition . . .

THE MOST HATED MAN IN LONDON

by PATRICIA MOYES

"It isn't often," said the Chief Inspector to his class of trainee-detectives, "that you come across a case you can solve by pure logic; but the Max Scotland murder was a classic, and I'll give you a big hint. It was all a question of timing.

"If ever a man asked to be killed, Max did. He was officially a moneylender and unofficially a blackmailer. He conducted all his business, legitimate and otherwise, from an old-fashioned office in the City, where he made his 'clients' call in person to hand over their money. Not all of his victims were rich. Max was democratic. He'd exploit even five bob's worth of human misery.

"Since he was probably the most hated man in London, I wasn't at all surprised to hear, one Saturday, that he'd been found in his office with his head bashed in. The alarm had been raised just before noon by Alfred Lightfoot, a young clerk from a nearby shipping firm, who'd had an appointment with Max, and found him dead.

"Now, here's the interesting part. The suite of offices where Max worked—if you can call it that—was guarded by a doorkeeper. An old soldier, very reliable. There was no way in or out except past the cubicle where this character, George Potts, was sitting all the morning.

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"Potts told us that Max had arrived at ten o'clock. Nobody else was in, it being Saturday, but during the morning Max had three visitors. Sure enough, we found his engagement book on his desk, but it didn't help us much, because Max had used code names for his victims. He fancied himself as a scholar and always gave the poor devils classical names. A Mr. Mars was expected at ten fifteen, and a Mrs. Niobe at eleven o'clock. Mr. Hermes—alias Lightfoot—was down for eleven thirty, but the entry had been altered in Max's writing to twelve o'clock.

"From the names I guessed that Mr. Mars was involved with somebody else's wife, that Niobe's scandal had something to do with a child, and that young Alfred might have been better-named Light-finger. Anyhow, it was obvious that each of them had a motive for murdering Max.

"George Potts knew Lightfoot and Niobe by sight. They were what he called 'regulars'—came at the same time, first Saturday of every month. He didn't know their names, but he described Niobe as young, beautiful, and rich—she wore a mink coat. As for Mr. Mars, he was a new client—middle-aged, stout, and extremely prosperous-looking.

"Mr. Mars, George said, had arrived at ten fifteen prompt and spent ten minutes in Max's office. Then he'd come striding out, apparently very agitated, slamming the door behind him. Niobe had only been in the office for a minute or two. When she came out, she was crying—but she always was, according to George. Lightfoot had arrived at five to twelve. It hadn't struck mid-day before he came running out of the office, shouting murder.

"The next thing I did was to look at the office. It was bleak enough—two chairs, a desk, a filing cabinet, and a safe. The safe was open, and it was empty. The only cheerful thing about the room was the coal fire, and from the look of the ashes all the papers from the safe had been burnt in it.

"Max was lying on the floor between the desk and the safe. His head had been smashed in from behind with a heavy iron poker. There was less blood than I'd expected—only a sluggish stream that had dried up just short of the doorway. There were no fingerprints except Max's, but there was a footprint. Just one, in the dried-up blood by the door. It was the print of a very fashionable ladies' shoe.

"We had one stroke of luck. Not all the papers in the grate were completely burnt, and we found several scraps with legible names on them—two of them women's. We got hold of photographs of these

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two ladies, and George Potts identified one of them as Niobe. She was Lady Elizabeth Carter-Johnson, daughter of an earl and wife of a rising politician. She was terribly distressed when I questioned her, begging me to keep her name out of the papers because of her husband's career. She didn't deny that she was being blackmailed, or that the footprint was hers. She'd arrived promptly at eleven, gone into the office and found Max lying there, dead. For a moment she'd been paralyzed with horror. Then she'd run away and not raised the alarm, for fear of being involved.

"Alfred Lightfoot said he'd telephoned at twenty to eleven, spoken to Max personally, and arranged to postpone his appointment. This was confirmed by Lightfoot's colleagues in his office. When he got there at five to twelve, he had found Max dead. Well now . . ."

The Chief Inspector regarded his class quizzically. "How many suspects have you eliminated so far?" There was dead silence.

"The first person in the clear," the Chief Inspector went on, "was Lightfoot. If he'd been the murderer, Lady Elizabeth would have found Max alive, and couldn't have described to me just how the body was lying, as she did. Then, the lady was saved by her own footprint. The doctor confirmed it would have taken about ten minutes for the stream of blood to reach the door. If she'd killed Max, she couldn't have left a footprint where she did.

"It began to look black for Mr. Mars—in spite of the fact that Lightfoot's phone call apparently gave him a perfect alibi. You can imagine my surprise when Mr. Mars telephoned Scotland Yard that afternoon, before the murder was reported in the papers. He was a businessman named Dacres, and the first of Max's victims to have the guts to report to the police. He swore he'd left Max alive and well at twenty-five past ten. You see my dilemma? Apparently, all three were telling the truth. Yet somebody was lying, and somebody had killed Max.

"I went and checked again with Potts. He was positive he'd got all the times right. People were always punctual for Mr. Scotland, he said. Never kept *him* waiting. After that I went back to the Yard and thought it all out. And then I made my arrest."

"You mean, you broke Dacres' alibi, sir?"

"No."

"But—"

"The murderer," said the Chief Inspector, "was George Potts. I told you that Max didn't spurn the most humble of victims. After that second interrogation I knew Potts was lying. He insisted that

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all three visitors were punctual—but Lightfoot's usual appointment was for eleven thirty, and he didn't turn up until five to twelve. Potts must have known that the appointment had been changed—so he must have been *in Max's office* and seen the engagement book, *after* Lightfoot's phone call and *before* Lady Elizabeth arrived. And when Lady Elizabeth got there, Max had been dead for ten minutes. So, allowing three minutes for the phone call, George Potts must have killed him between seventeen and ten minutes to eleven. As I said, just a simple question of timing."

NEXT MONTH . . .

12 ***NEW*** stories—including

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a *NEW* short story by

DOROTHY SIMPSON

The birthday gift had a curiously telescopic and hypnotic effect, a curiously repelling force . . . this story will linger in your memory for a long time . . .

BOXES WITHIN BOXES

by DOROTHY SIMPSON

The package was large, square, flat.

"Happy birthday, darling," Michael said, handing it over. His smile was smug.

Charlotte opened her arms to receive it, giving him an enthusiastic thank-you kiss. She loved presents. She liked to prolong the anticipation as much as possible, to prod, to guess, to delay. The fact that so many parcels, when opened, revealed something prosaic, or even disappointing, never prevented her from experiencing this familiar leap of excitement.

"Shall I open it now?" she asked, hoping that the answer would be "No."

Michael shrugged. "Whenever you like." But she could see that he wanted her to.

"I will then." His gratified look told her that she had said the right thing, and she suppressed a sigh. It was so difficult, this constant effort to please someone else at the expense of one's own feelings. Even though they were engaged, they had known each other for only two months and Charlotte sometimes felt as though she were being carried downriver by a current too strong for her. Michael was a very forceful person.

"Shall I guess?" Already her fingers were feeling the shape of it, her mind assessing, considering, discarding. Not a shallow box, no—

"I shouldn't do that." Michael's tone was sharp. "You might damage it."

Charlotte obediently laid the package flat on the table and began to unwrap it. A picture, perhaps?

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It was a picture. A painting? A drawing? Charlotte didn't know much about art. She made appropriate noises of delight, propped it up on the settee, and stepped back for a better view.

Michael watched her complacently. "It's a Frigo. Had a hell of a job getting hold of it, I can tell you. He's become too fashionable these days."

"It's . . . fascinating," murmured Charlotte, suppressing the disloyal thought that it was typical of Michael to have bought something which would prove to be a good investment. She didn't like to ask the classic "What is it?" She advanced to study the picture more closely, then stepped back again to consider it from afar. It was true, it was fascinating. But in a way she didn't like. In fact, for some incomprehensible reason, it repelled her. It was as though, in the first moment of seeing it, something in it had struck her a physical blow.

"It's . . . powerful," she managed to say. And all the time she was asking herself: Why? For, whether one looked at it closely or from a distance, if one analyzed the thing, there was really nothing to it.

There was a white background, and etched in fine black lines, a series of boxes, each inside the other. The largest box was drawn a few centimeters from the frame (which was also black) and the others were each the same distance inside each other, the smallest being only a few centimeters square. The effect was curiously telescopic, hypnotic, as if the onlooker were being sucked in toward the center of the picture. In the bottom right-hand corner of the smallest box was a tiny black blob the shape of a comma.

"Yes, it is, isn't it? It's called 'Isolation,' " Michael added.

Isolation . . .

Suddenly Charlotte knew that she didn't want this—this thing in her flat, not at any price. But Michael would be so hurt. She glanced at him uneasily. He was standing there, looking at the picture, hands clasped behind his back, rocking slightly to and fro in complacency. Not for the first time Charlotte felt a pang of doubt. Had she made a disastrous mistake? Did she really want to spend the rest of her life with this rather pompous stranger?

"I'm so glad you like it." And taking her unawares, he turned suddenly and took her in his arms. Charlotte responded with relief, the familiar physical contact brushing aside her unease. She couldn't hurt him by saying the picture repelled her. She would keep it for a while and then, after a suitable length of time, begin to hint

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that she was not as keen on it as she had at first thought. But not today. It would ruin the evening.

Michael released her. "We've just got time to hang it before we go," he said. "Now, where would you like it?"

"I haven't got any picture hooks," Charlotte said hastily.

"Don't worry. I've thought of that." Michael's hand went into his pocket and emerged with a small white packet. "I picked some up on the way."

There was no evading it, then. The picture must be hung.

"Any definite ideas?"

"No, I don't think so." Charlotte looked about helplessly.

"Then I know just the place. Come on." And carrying the painting in one hand, Michael seized Charlotte's arm with the other and propelled her into the bedroom. This was a long narrow slit of a room. Charlotte's bed stood against one of the shorter walls. She suffered from insomnia and when he had discovered this, Michael had immediately said that he knew just the thing to help her sleep. The following Saturday he had turned up with paint and brushes and had shut himself into the bedroom. She had not been allowed to inspect his handiwork until he had finished, and had then been somewhat startled to find that he had painted the other short wall in the bedroom black.

"You'll be astounded to find what a difference it'll make," he had said. "A friend of mine tried it and it worked like a charm. It creates the illusion that the room is shorter, for a start, and that'll be more cosy. It'll give you a sense of security, a sort of back-to-the-womb feeling. When you can't sleep, just lie there looking at that wall and you'll be amazed at the effect it'll have."

Charlotte had simply found it depressing. The tiny room had seemed more claustrophobic than ever. Indeed, of late, life in general seemed to be becoming increasingly claustrophobic. Wherever she went, whatever she did, walls seemed to be closing in on her.

Now Michael held the picture up against the black wall and craned back to study the effect. "There. What d'you think of that? Could have been made for it, couldn't it?"

Charlotte did not have the heart to tell him that of all places in the apartment, her bedroom wall would be the last where she would choose to hang this particular picture. Privately resolving to take it down each night and put it up again each morning, she nodded with as much apparent enthusiasm as she could muster.

For her, the evening was spoiled—spoiled by more than an un-

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fortunate birthday present. One could get rid of an unwanted gift in time, but a husband—that was a different matter. Charlotte had never been one of those who think of marriage as a trial-and-error business. When she got married, married she would stay. But now . . . She looked back over their brief courtship and wondered if Michael's masterful ways, which she had at first found so attractive, were really a symptom of crass insensitivity. How, for example, could he not have seen how deeply the picture disturbed her?

The birthday dinner was not a success. Charlotte's consciousness of the picture hanging on the wall of her bedroom like a great black spider awaiting the arrival of its victim, robbed the food of its flavor, the champagne of its sparkle. Her memory of it was etched indelibly on her inner eye, more vivid than the reality which surrounded her. She was poor company indeed and it was not surprising that as the evening progressed Michael became more and more morose.

When for the third time she had denied that there was anything wrong, he retired into an offended silence. Charlotte glanced at him guiltily from beneath lowered eyelids. Had he not, after all, done everything a man could do to make her birthday a happy occasion? Impulsively she put out her hand and placed it over his. "I'm sorry Michael," she said. "You've been wonderful. I've just got rather a headache, that's all."

At once he was all solicitude. She was whisked out of the restaurant, into a taxi, and escorted upstairs to her flat. "I won't come in," he said firmly. "You ought to have an early night." He kissed her briefly. "I'll give you a ring in the morning to see how you are."

It was a relief to step into the silence of the apartment, to close the door behind her and know that she was alone. Except that . . . slowly, unwillingly, she crossed to enter the bedroom and switched on the light. The picture, its whiteness and geometric simplicity of design stark against the black wall, sprang out at her. Almost against her will she found herself moving toward it, peering more and more closely at the strange little comma-shaped blob at its heart. It was, she saw now, not a solid block of ink as she had thought, but some kind of finely executed design.

There was something vaguely familiar about the blob, if only she could put her finger on it. But the knowledge hovered stubbornly at the edge of her consciousness, unwilling to be recognized. Motionless, poised as if on the edge of an abyss, her eyes pinned to the shape so tiny yet so conspicuous by reason of its being an irregularity in a landscape of symmetry, she stood for what seemed to be an

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endless moment, a fragment of time in which eternity seemed to be caught and held, its essence distilled into a single drop. It was as if she, suspended in that drop, were being sucked out into the coldness and bleakness of unimaginable vistas of empty space, and it was only by a supreme effort of will that she forced herself to look away from the picture, to refocus on the room.

She stood for a moment trembling, her arms moving to clamp themselves across her chest, to hug herself into some reassurance of her own reality. Then, forcing her reluctant hands to grasp the picture, she lifted it off the wall, walked briskly into the sitting room, and pushed it under the settee. There it could stay until Michael's next visit. And whether he liked it or not, she would ask him to take it away.

As she moved about the apartment preparing for the night, she avoided looking at the settee. Even though the picture was hidden away, its presence was unforgettable. Her consciousness of it permeated every routine act. And in bed, of course, she could not sleep, the image of it once again as vivid behind her desperately closed eyelids as if it were suspended a few feet above her head in broad daylight. And even invisible, the thing still exerted that curiously hypnotic effect, sucking the viewer into the center of the vortex.

Over and over again Charlotte traveled down the corridor of boxes toward that curiously cramped little shape in the center. How strange that at first sight this appeared to be no more than a blob. It must have been executed with an incredibly fine nib under, surely, a magnifying glass or some such thing. No one could have drawn anything like that with the naked eye.

Charlotte sat up suddenly, shoulders rigid with shock, eyes wide-open in the darkness. A magnifying glass. If the artist had indeed used a magnifying glass—

In a flash she was out of bed, in the sitting room, tugging impatiently at the drawer where she had put the old magnifying glass she had picked up on a junk stall in the local flea market. She had bought it for its prettily enameled handle. Yes, here it was.

She bent to pull the picture out from beneath the settee, laid it flat on the table, and pulling the lamp nearer so that the light shone directly down on to the picture, she centered the magnifying glass over the tiny comma shape and bent to examine it.

A tiny face leaped out at her, a minute eye transfixed hers, and the magnifying glass clattered onto the table as she recoiled in shock. She retrieved it with shaking fingers, hesitated for a moment,

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steeling herself, then bent to look again. Could she have imagined it?

But she had not. Magnified, the tiny comma became a figure, huddled in a foetus-like crouch, arms hugging knees, and face turned despairingly toward the onlooker.

Isolation. A person turned in upon himself, retreating from reality into the only safety he knows—himself, shut away from the dangers of the encroaching world in a cell of his own choosing.

Still bent over the drawing, Charlotte became aware of the world which surrounded her, of the thousands and thousands of people in the sleeping city, shut away in their little boxes. Slowly she straightened up, looked unseeingly about the room, and then, like a sleepwalker, began to move toward the bedroom. Now she knew what she had to do.

At eight fifteen the following morning Michael rang Charlotte's apartment. There was no reply. He frowned. That was odd. Normally Charlotte did not leave for work until a quarter to nine.

As soon as he reached the office he rang the Secretarial Agency where she worked. She had not yet arrived. He tried the apartment again, with no success. When, half an hour later, he rang the Agency yet again and was told that Charlotte still hadn't arrived, he asked to speak to Jenny, who lived in the apartment below Charlotte. But Jenny knew nothing. She had neither seen nor heard Charlotte that morning and had not thought to go up as they always left for work separately, preferring to be independent of each other.

"Perhaps she's overslept," Jenny suggested. "I wouldn't be surprised. She was bumping around till all hours last night."

"What do you mean, bumping around?"

"Rearranging the furniture or something. I don't know."

"But I've tried the flat twice this morning already. There's no reply."

Suddenly, unaccountably, Michael was frightened. "I'm going over," he said.

"Pick me up on the way." Jenny was fond of Charlotte and she, too, was worried. Charlotte was punctual, methodical, punctilious. Unthinkable that she would fail to phone to make her apologies, if she were unable to come to work. And she had been concerned about Charlotte for some time. Over the last couple of months Charlotte had become quieter, more withdrawn than ever.

She said so to Michael in the taxi.

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"Do you think so?" he said. "I hadn't noticed."

No, you wouldn't, thought Jenny. She had her own views as to Michael's suitability as a husband for Charlotte. Though to be fair, he hadn't known Charlotte very long. And he was obviously head over heels in love with her. He was the last person Jenny would have expected to leave the office in the middle of the morning just because he was concerned about his fiancée. "Don't worry," Jenny said reassuringly. "There could be a dozen explanations. Perhaps her phone's out of order, perhaps she forgot to set her alarm, perhaps she's been called away on some emergency and didn't have time to let anyone know."

He shook his head impatiently. "She'd have made time. You know Charlotte. Besides, what emergency? There's no one to call on her, you know that."

Jenny did. She would have hated to be in Charlotte's situation. No brothers or sisters, no grandparents, no aunts and uncles. And then, at the age of thirteen, to have lost both parents. Charlotte wasn't the sort of person to talk freely about her family or about herself and Jenny knew all this only because she was personnel officer in the Agency, which was a large one. And only she and the Director were aware of the nervous breakdown Charlotte had suffered a few years ago, of the year Charlotte had spent in a psychiatric hospital.

Michael, she was sure, knew nothing about it. It was a pity that Charlotte had not found herself a gentler, more understanding man, one who would have enabled her to open up a little. At first Jenny had been pleased when Charlotte acquired a boy friend—she'd spent enough time trying to persuade her to go out more. "Don't you ever get fed up, staying in night after night, all by yourself?" she'd once asked.

"No," Charlotte had replied. "Never." Then, responding uncharacteristically to the concern in Jenny's face, "It's safer, you see."

"Safer?"

"Yes. If you depend on yourself, you won't be let down."

Jenny had been appalled. Now, remembering this conversation, she glanced uneasily at Michael. Had he let Charlotte down? If so—she found that she was sitting on the very edge of her seat, leaning forward, willing the taxi driver to go faster.

When they arrived at the building they were both out of the taxi almost before it had stopped, Michael thrusting a note into the driver's hand. "Keep the change."

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In through the front door and up the stairs, Michael leading, and both of them taking the steps two at a time. Charlotte's door was locked and there was no response to their knocks or their shouts.

Michael did not comment. He merely put his shoulder to the door and heaved. The lock broke with a crack, but still the door refused to open. "There's something behind it," he said grimly. "Give me a hand, will you?"

Together they strained and struggled, finally managing to open up a sufficiently wide gap for them to squeeze through, one after the other. They saw then that every item of furniture in the apartment had apparently been piled up behind the door.

"Charlotte?" Michael called as he pushed and kicked the obstacles aside like a man demented. He broke away from the barricade at last, stumbling as his foot caught in something. "Charlotte," he cried, running toward the bedroom, Jenny close behind him.

He flung open the door and she heard the hiss of his indrawn breath as he came to a dead halt, causing her to bump into him. He rocked a little with the impact but did not move aside, every muscle frozen, it seemed, into a shocked rigidity. Jenny, unable to see over his shoulder, edged through the narrow gap beside him.

By now she was certain of what she would see. The shock, therefore, was all the greater.

The room had been completely stripped. Floor, ceiling, window, and all the walls save one were bare. Against that wall, the black one, sat Charlotte, a huddled, foetus-like shape turned sideways to them. One blank, inimical eye peered out at them from beneath the tangle that was Charlotte's usually immaculate black hair, and only the steady rise and fall of the hunched shoulders showed that she was still alive.

And above her on the wall, like an echo, hung the picture.

"Q"

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a *NEW* Interpol story by

EDWARD D. HOCH

Laura Charme and Sebastian Blue are Interpol investigators who specialize in travel crime—robberies and murders on airplanes, cruise ships, and railway trains. In this unusual case a number of clergymen have been chloroformed on night trains to Rome—but with the coast clear in each instance, the thief has taken nothing! And oh, yes, meet Father Brown . . .

THE CASE OF THE CHLOROFORMED CLERICS

by EDWARD D. HOCH

It was a lazy June day at Interpol headquarters just outside of Paris, and Laura Charme wasn't looking forward to spending the next eight hours poring over dog-eared file cards. The process of computerizing the vast store of criminal information in Interpol's files was proving more of a task than anyone had thought, and virtually every employee at the headquarters building had been at it for months.

That was why she was both surprised and pleased when Sebastian Blue stopped at her desk and asked, "How'd you like a train trip to Rome?"

"Don't tease me, Sebastian! On a day like this I'd gladly chuck these file cards for any excuse whatever."

"I'm not kidding, Laura. I think this is something you can handle. Want to talk about it?"

She followed him into his office and sat opposite a desk piled high with more banded sets of file cards. "What is it, Sebastian? Railway crime?"

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He nodded. "We seem to be the experts, whether it's airlines or cruise ships or railways. You may know the Italian railways have been experiencing a great deal of trouble with thieves using passkeys to enter sleeping compartments at night and rob them. The attendant isn't usually on duty after ten o'clock, and the thieves often use spray cans of chloroform to sedate the passengers before they enter. A person wakes up in the morning and discovers he's been robbed."

Laura nodded. "I've read the reports."

"Recently these crimes have taken an unusual new turn. A number of clergymen, mainly Catholic priests traveling to and from Vatican City, have been chloroformed on the night trains. But oddly enough nothing seems to have been stolen."

"You want me to investigate a non-robbery?"

"Not investigate, Laura. They're getting quite touchy around here about some of our past investigations. They only want someone from Interpol who's familiar with the files on known train criminals to make the trip from Paris to Rome and watch for familiar faces." He paused and then added, "Especially among the train crew."

"They think it's an inside job?"

"That's always a possibility."

"When do I leave?"

"Tomorrow, if you can."

"I wish you were coming with me, Sebastian."

"If a problem develops, give me a call. I'll try to get away."

Laura boarded the train to Rome the following afternoon, after spending some hours poring over the files on known railway criminals. The distance from Paris to Rome was just 900 miles, and the train would become a sleeper after it crossed into Italy and stopped at Milan. The prospect of the long train journey was depressing, especially since she doubted the trip would yield any results.

It was not until the train reached Milan late in the evening that her interest perked up. A number of clergymen, perhaps a half dozen in all, boarded the train for the overnight journey to Rome. One of them, a plump rosy-cheeked priest, chose a seat in the compartment with Laura. After a time he noticed she was reading a British novel and asked, "Pardon me, but are you English?"

"Partly," Laura admitted, thankful for some conversation to break up the long journey. She closed the book and introduced herself. "I'm Laura Charme. I've been on this train since Paris, and it's good to have someone to talk to."

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"Father Augustine Brown."

"Father Brown, like Chesterton's detective?"

He blushed a bit. "People do mention that from time to time. Some say I even look like him, though I doubt if it's much of a compliment to resemble a fictional character."

"Are you here on a visit?"

"Oh my, no! I teach at the Pontifical Gregorian University in Vatican City. We're between terms and I was spending a few days in the north. Wonderful country!"

"It is," Laura agreed. "I've visited Italy several times."

"You're going to Rome?"

She nodded. "I probably should have taken a sleeping compartment, but perhaps I can doze in my seat."

"It's just as well. Many of my fellow clergymen have been robbed in their compartments."

"I know about the terrorism in Italy. And I've read that the Minister of Justice was kidnaped last month."

"I do not speak of kidnaping or terrorism, but plain criminality. They prowl the corridors of the sleeping cars after midnight, sometimes spraying chloroform through the vents in the compartment door. When they're certain the sleeper will not awaken they use a passkey to enter the compartment."

Laura shuddered. "That's enough to scare a girl right off the train! Has it happened to friends of yours?"

The little priest nodded. "Two weeks ago to Father Rudolpho. He teaches with me at the University."

"What did the thief take?"

"That's the odd part. Nothing seemed to be missing. When Father Rudolpho awakened in the morning he realized that someone had ransacked his overnight bag and shaving kit, but everything was still there." He gave her an impish grin. "Of course clergymen carry very little cash."

The conductor came by, collecting tickets from the new passengers. He was a new one and Laura studied his face, but she couldn't remember it from any of the Interpol files she'd studied. She chatted a while longer with Father Brown and then as the hour passed midnight she dozed off, gently lulled by the clacking of wheels against tracks. When she awakened it was nearly dawn and the train was pulling into Rome's Stazione Termini.

Father Brown said goodbye and left the train with the other priests. Laura was slower getting off and by the time she reached

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the platform she was aware of a commotion at one of the other tracks. A group of uniformed policemen milled about, and when she approached one of them she was told, "No one allowed here. There's been an accident."

She saw a stretcher being removed from the train, and caught a glimpse of a white-haired man wearing a clerical collar. An attendant, perhaps a doctor, was trying to loosen it from around his neck as the stretcher bore him away. "I must speak to your superior," she told the officer, summoning up her best Italian. "I am from Interpol."

He inspected the little plastic card she produced and seemed to hesitate. "Do you have information about this?"

"I might have."

He led Laura through the milling crowd of passengers and police to a short mustached man in a raincoat. "This is Inspector Matita."

Matita glanced at the card she showed him and frowned. "What is Interpol's involvement in this?"

Laura explained the purpose of her journey. "Was it another chloroform attack, like the others?"

The Inspector nodded. "The conductor found him in bed with the door forced. His name is Father Jessup. He hasn't awakened from the chloroform yet, but he'll be all right."

"Was anything taken?"

"We won't know until we can talk to him."

Laura walked along the outside of the train with Inspector Matita until they reached the sleeping car where the attack had occurred. The sweetish odor of chloroform still hung in the air. She stood on tiptoe to examine a ventilator grille set high in the door. "The thief sprayed the chloroform through here?" she asked.

"We believe so. It's a liquid, you know, which is one reason it was finally replaced in hospital operating rooms by the more easily handled gases and injections. The criminals use a spray can, like an atomizer, and the droplets of chloroform mix with the air before gradually sinking to the floor—much like an insecticide. After a short time the thief enters the compartment wearing a gauze mask or other facial protection, while the unfortunate passenger is fast asleep."

"Can't this bolt be locked from the inside?" Laura asked, inspecting the door.

"A good sneak thief can open it in a minute, especially when he doesn't have to worry about waking up his victim."

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"But sneak thieves usually steal something. I understand that in the attacks on clergymen nothing has been stolen."

The Inspector shrugged. "What does a priest have to steal?"

"There must be something. Otherwise, why do the attacks continue?"

"In our country, as in yours, mental illness sometimes takes the form of violent anti-clericalism."

"But they're not injured in any way, are they?"

"No," he admitted.

"Then it hardly seems like anti-clericalism."

They left the train and walked back toward the station. "Sooner or later our thief will get careless," Matita said. "Someone will see him at work with his spray can and the case will be solved overnight."

"What if the crimes stop before you catch him?"

"Why should they stop?"

"Perhaps one of these times he'll find what he's looking for."

Laura stood to one side, viewing the train's crew as they departed, but none of them resembled the Interpol photos she'd studied. Matita told her that all the attacks on clergymen during the past month had occurred between Rome and Milan, but he could give her little additional information. She thanked him for his help and took a taxi to the hospital where the latest victim was being treated.

Father Jessup was an American priest visiting Rome on his vacation. He assured Laura that the effects of the chloroform had worn off and the hospital planned to release him shortly. She waited while he went through his overnight bag, but nothing was missing. It was just like the others.

Laura had planned to return to Paris on the sleeper that night, but instead she took a taxi to a hotel near the Trevi Fountain and booked a room for the night. Then she phoned Paris and spoke to Sebastian Blue.

"There's been another attack on a priest, Sebastian. I was at the station just after the train pulled in."

"Spot anyone familiar?"

"No. And nothing was taken."

"What are your plans?"

"I want to stay overnight. I might get onto something."

"You have a knack for it," he admitted. "But be careful."

After a quick lunch Laura headed across the Tiber to Vatican

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City. In a city of clergymen, most of them would be there. On the edge of St. Peter's Square she spotted Father Brown crossing the street.

"Father Brown!" she called out.

He turned, startled, and recognized her at once. "Well, well, my companion from the train! So you decided to remain in Rome after all!"

"Only for a day. But you're just the person I need. You mentioned a friend of yours, a Father Rudolpho, who was one of the priests chloroformed on a train."

"Yes, indeed—a terrible experience!"

"Could I speak to him? It might be important."

The little priest hesitated. "Well . . ."

Laura produced her Interpol identification. "I'm investigating it officially."

"You're some sort of policewoman?" he asked in amazement.

"Well, not exactly. Interpol supplies information to police departments worldwide. We have no investigative powers of our own."

"But you just said—"

"I'm investigating it from an identification standpoint only. Our records list a great many people specializing in railroad crime. If I can match up a familiar face it might give the Italian police the suspect they need."

"I see. Then certainly you should speak with Father Rudolpho. Let me arrange it. Where can you be reached?"

She gave him the name of her hotel. "I'll just be there overnight."

"Never fear—I will phone you later this afternoon."

Father Augustine Brown was good to his word. He phoned Laura shortly before five o'clock and promised to meet her in the hotel lobby with Father Rudolpho in an hour. When Laura went down to the lobby she saw him sitting with a tall angular priest with white hair. Father Rudolpho bowed as he was introduced.

"A pleasure to meet you. Father Brown tells me you're investigating the railroad crimes."

"That's correct. What can you tell me about your own experience?"

"Very little, I fear." He spoke in English, but with a thick Italian accent. Laura imagined his authoritative voice would carry well in a church or classroom. "I was traveling from Rome to the seminary near Milano where I teach. I retired for the night in my sleeping car, being careful to lock the door. Generally I am a light sleeper on the trains, but this night I slept soundly. I remember a sweetish

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odor in the compartment and that is all. I was awakened in the morning by the porter pounding at the door. There was evidence that someone had gone through my belongings, but nothing had been taken."

"Were you carrying anything of value?"

"Oh, not really. A gold-plated chalice which I use at Mass, and some tape recordings for my teaching. The chalice has some slight value, I suppose, but they left it."

"Then the thief was searching for some specific objects."

"Perhaps."

"Do you travel that route often?"

"Oh, yes. I come down twice every month. I am here now, as you can see."

She turned to Father Brown. "Do you know any of the other victims?"

He shook his head, but Father Rudolpho said, "I know one. Monsignor Scussa. He was robbed just last week, a few days after I was."

"By robbed do you mean something was taken from him?"

"Well, no. It was like me. He was put to sleep and his compartment was entered."

"But nothing was taken?"

"No."

"I would like to speak with Monsignor Scussa," Laura decided.

It was arranged within the hour. With her two priests as escorts, Laura returned to the Vatican. They passed a news kiosk proclaiming the latest terrorist outrage, and she wondered vaguely if terrorists could be involved in the clerical attacks. But no connection seemed obvious. The crimes in the sleeping cars seemed removed from all else.

Monsignor Scussa was a tall white-haired man with a broad smile and a good sense of humor about his experience on the train. But after a few jokes he turned serious. "Surely the police can do something to halt these attacks."

"We're trying," Laura said. "Tell me, Monsignor, what did you have with you on the night of the attack?"

"Only my black satchel. Little of value in it."

"A chalice, perhaps?"

"Not on that occasion. The most valuable object was a gold crucifix worth less than one hundred American dollars."

"Still, it's an odd thing for a thief to overlook. He doesn't seem to be finding what he wants."

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"Ah," the monsignor suggested, "perhaps he comes to steal our souls."

The others nodded, unsmiling. In a world where each morning paper brought news of some new terrorist crime, it seemed at least a possibility.

It was later, when Laura was once more alone with Father Augustine Brown, that an odd thought struck her. "They look alike, don't they?"

"Who?"

"Father Rudolpho and the monsignor. Not exactly alike, of course, but they're both tall and white-haired."

"It hadn't occurred to me."

"I'm going to check on it," Laura decided. "Inspector Matita must have records on the other victims." She was remembering that the latest victim, Father Jessup, also had white hair, though he was shorter.

"Good luck," Father Brown said.

"I'll need it."

By ten o'clock she'd verified her wild idea. A total of nine clergymen had been chloroformed on trains during the past month, counting this morning's victim. Each of them was white-haired, and all but Father Jessup were above average in height. Inspector Matita studied the list and looked perplexed. "What does it mean?" he asked.

"The thief is searching for something. He knows the general description of the man who has it—a tall white-haired priest—but nothing more. He's chloroformed these nine men and searched their belongings trying to find this thing."

"Which is—?"

"I don't know," Laura admitted. But she had an idea how to find out. "These attempts at robbery have all been on trains between Rome and Milan, haven't they?"

"That is correct," Matita agreed. "Generally on the southbound trains."

"Chances are there's someone in the station in Milan spotting likely victims. I know someone who is tall and white-haired. He just might be willing to serve as a decoy."

Sebastian Blue had never pictured himself as a priest. His years in London with Scotland Yard, followed by his second career with Interpol, had ill prepared him to masquerade as a man of the cloth.

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Seated on the Milan-Rome train two evenings later, he was still uncertain how Laura had talked him into it. True, he was escaping the boredom of the file cards, but he couldn't imagine that a single trip disguised as a priest would be enough to lure the criminals into action.

"Trust me, Sebastian," she'd told him on the phone. "Fly down to Milan and board the train there. I'm sure there's someone at the station watching for priests of your general description. It's the only thing that would make sense. You can board a sleeper just before midnight. It makes a couple of stops and arrives in Rome before seven. Only don't sleep!"

And so he'd trusted her. He'd flown to Milan in his priestly garb, carrying the black overnight bag as she'd instructed, and boarded the train. The sleeping compartment was dim and cramped, and he was more concerned with being uncomfortable than with any threat of bodily harm. He'd seen not a sign of Laura, and had no idea whether she too was riding the night train to Rome.

He turned out his light shortly after one, as the train was passing through La Spezia on the coast and starting down the western edge of Italy's boot. The Ligurian Sea was out there beyond his window somewhere, but it remained invisible in the darkness.

Presently his ears detected a faint hissing at the door, and that was his first warning. He sat up quietly in the bunk and reached for the tiny oxygen tank with its attached face mask. The hissing continued for almost a minute and then stopped. Holding the oxygen mask against his face with his left hand, he used his right to slide the Beretta automatic out of the overnight bag.

After a moment there was a clicking at the door and he saw it begin to open. A dark shape, barely visible against the dimness of the train's corridor, slipped into the compartment. Then the door closed and all was silence except for the clicking of wheels on rails. Anticipating the next move Sebastian took a deep breath and held it while he slipped the oxygen mask beneath the covers. Almost at once he was aware of the glow of a tiny flashlight hitting his face. Then the light was removed and shifted toward the floor. Sebastian opened one eye a crack and saw hands going through his open bag.

He tried taking a breath without the oxygen mask but that was a mistake. At once the sweetish odor of the chloroform assailed him and he gasped for breath. The flashlight swung back to his face.

Sebastian hurled himself at the intruder, trying to overpower him before the chloroform could dull his senses.They thrashed about the

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tiny compartment, hitting the bunk and toppling to the floor. The sweetish odor was stronger there and Sebastian knew he'd be helpless in a matter of seconds. The other's hands were on his throat, pressing hard. He tried to reach the gun under the covers of the bed, and finally his clutching fingers found the cold metal of the butt. There was no time for a damaging shot. He could only squeeze the trigger and pray.

The bullet hit the opposite wall but the sound of the shot loosened his assailant's fingers long enough for Sebastian to break free. He staggered to his feet as the man bounded for the door, and then Sebastian collapsed on the waiting bunk.

"Sebastian! Are you all right?"

Someone was calling his name from far away.

"Sebastian! Speak to me!"

He opened his eyes and saw Laura crouched by his side, cradling his head in her hands. "I do believe it's an angel," he murmured.

"Oh, Sebastian, it's only me!"

"Did you catch him?"

"Damn right! A little karate in the corridor stopped him cold. It was all my fault. I was supposed to be watching but we didn't know a thing until we heard your shot."

He tried to sit up but discovered his head was aching. "How long have I been out?"

"A few minutes. Luckily you didn't get much of a dose."

"Has he talked? Do you know what he was after?"

"Let's go ask him," she suggested. He noticed her slight smile.

Down the corridor in an unused compartment Laura introduced Sebastian to Inspector Matita. The Italian shook his hand with vigor. "A remarkable job of impersonation, sir! You looked more authentic than my parish priest."

Sebastian smiled. "Perhaps I have a new career awaiting me." He turned to his assailant and his mouth dropped open. "It's a woman!"

It was indeed a woman, and he saw that Laura was enjoying his surprise. The woman was clad in jeans and a dark jacket, and had a gauze mask which she'd probably worn over her mouth and nose to screen out the chloroform droplets. She was young—certainly still in her mid-twenties—and fairly attractive in a dark pouting way.

"She's strong," Laura said. "And the chloroform weakened you."

"Even so, it makes me feel old to know a woman was getting the better of me."

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"This is no ordinary woman," Inspector Matita told them. "We have quite a file on Miss Rosa Impegno. She's a leading terrorist, wanted by the police of West Germany as well as Italy."

Sebastian Blue rubbed his neck, still feeling the clutch of her steely fingers. "I'm pleased to meet you, Miss Impegno. Suppose you tell us what you were after in my compartment."

For an answer she threw back her head and spat at him. Sebastian barely ducked in time. "You won't get anything out of her," Laura said. "I've seen the type before."

"We'll deal with her back in Rome," the Inspector assured them.

Laura thought about it. "Maybe I've got a suggestion," she said at last. "Come out in the corridor with me."

When they were outside, with the door closed between them and the handcuffed terrorist, Sebastian asked, "What is it, Laura?"

"She's about my build. I could dress in her clothes and take her place."

"Where?" Matita asked.

"She's obviously well known to your Rome police, so she wouldn't risk staying on the train till then. She'll leave it at Grosseto, the last stop before Rome. It'll still be dark then and someone could be waiting with a car."

Inspector Matita smiled. "You've been studying our train schedules."

"It could be dangerous," Sebastian cautioned. "We know now we're dealing with terrorists."

"It's a gamble we have to take, Sebastian. If there is a car waiting for her, no one else could get close enough."

"We might search her for the train ticket," Matita suggested.

Laura shook her head. "She'd have bought a ticket for Rome in any event."

"Let's do it," Sebastian said suddenly, glancing at his watch. "We don't have much time before Grosseto."

Laura changed clothes quickly with the reluctant Rosa Impegno. At one point only the threat of force persuaded the young woman to cooperate. "We're pulling into Grosseto," the Inspector said. "As I remember, there's a parking lot next to the station. Any car meeting the train would be waiting there."

Laura hopped off almost before the train came to a full stop, striding quickly off the platform in her dark jeans and jacket. From the parking lot she saw headlights blink once, and she knew she'd guessed right. She made directly for the car, keeping her head down,

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and reached for the door on the passenger's side.

Suddenly the car shot forward, almost knocking her over. The driver's face was shielded from view but as the station lights fell briefly across the windshield she caught a glimpse of a Roman collar. Then the car picked up speed and headed out of the lot. Laura tugged at her gun, but by the time she had it out there was no chance for a shot.

Rosa Impegno's fellow terrorist had escaped and all Laura knew about him was that he was a priest.

Or someone posing as a priest.

Father Augustine Brown looked up from his cup of espresso with some surprise. "Why, it's Laura Charme, isn't it? I thought you had left our city for good."

"Does anyone ever leave Rome for good, Father Brown? But I'll admit I'm back sooner than I expected."

"Were you looking for me?"

She nodded. "I ran into you near here the other day, so I thought I'd check the places in the area. I phoned the University but of course they're between terms and no one is there."

He smiled benignly. "This is one of my favorite cafés. It gives an excellent view of St. Peter's dome, don't you think?"

"Father Brown, I have to speak with you about an unpleasant matter."

"Oh?"

"Terrorism and political kidnaping. I'm sure you've been following events in the newspaper—especially the kidnaping of Italy's Minister of Justice last month."

"But how does this concern me?"

"It was terrorists who were responsible for the chloroforming of priests on the trains between Milan and Rome. We arrested one of them, a young woman, the night before last. She's finally told us some of what we want to know, though she refuses to identify her partners in the train attacks. It seems that about a month ago she and some others kidnaped the Minister of Justice. Apparently they've been holding him somewhere in the north of Italy, and they forced him to make a tape recording, to be delivered to radio stations in Rome. The woman had the tape with her on the train to Rome when the police stopped it for a sudden search. As a known terrorist she had to dispose of the tape before they recognized her. She slipped it into the black overnight bag of a priest in the same compartment,

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where it avoided detection. But when the police released her after questioning, she found that the tall white-haired priest was gone."

"An interesting story," Father Brown admitted.

"The woman, Rosa Impegno, and the other terrorists were now in great danger. The missing tape apparently could be traced to them, though she's vague on this point. Anyway, the plan was to make several copies in Rome for distribution to the radio stations and other media. But now the dangerous tape was being carried around by an unknown priest who might discover it at any moment."

"And that caused the attacks on the priests?"

"Exactly. They knew the priest hadn't yet discovered the tape because there was nothing in the papers about it. So Rosa's partner traveled the Milan-Rome trains searching for priests who fit her vague description. In order to travel with them without arousing undue suspicion, he dressed as a priest himself."

Father Brown's eyebrows went up at this. "The girl told all these things to the police?"

"Inspector Matita was able to persuade her to cooperate. The thought of a long prison sentence often works wonders on young criminals."

"This woman was responsible for the chloroformings?"

Laura nodded. "They feared that anything more violent might scare priests off the trains before the tape was located. Rosa herself had only a vague recollection of the priest's appearance, and of course there was always the possibility that he had left the tape at home or had changed bags. But they had to keep trying, before the incriminating tape was discovered."

"Did she tell you the identity of this bogus priest?"

"Not yet, but I'm sure she will." Laura looked him in the eye. "Father Brown, as a reader of Chesterton I wonder if you're aware that the fifty-one stories about your namesake form a perfect circle. The first story, *The Blue Cross,* and the last one, *The Vampire of the Village,* each has Father Brown exposing a criminal masquerading as a cleric."

"Is that so?" he replied. "I'd never realized that."

Laura tensed herself, watching his hands. "You said you knew Father Rudolpho because the two of you teach together at the University in Vatican City, but he told me he teaches at a seminary in Milan."

His eyes glinted. "Is that what's bothering you, my dear girl?"

She hurried on now, talking faster. "Rosa's partner, the bogus

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priest, was waiting for her at Grosseto. He drove away quickly when I approached the car dressed in her clothes. He drove away because he recognized me. He knew me, Father Brown! I tried to check on you at the University, but they're closed, of course. You thought of everything."

"Perhaps Father Rudolpho is the impostor. Or the monsignor."

"I think it's you."

He sighed and shook his head. "A lifetime in the clergy and I'm accused of being a fraud! Father Rudolpho is teaching near Milan this term because the seminary there is affiliated with the University. I can assure you there's nothing sinister about it. I am not an impostor, he is not an impostor, the monsignor is not an impostor. Come with me to the Vatican office. It's easy enough to check."

She went with him, still on her guard, but within a half hour she was ready to admit she'd been wrong. She stood dejected in the Vatican office and shook her head. "I'm certain the man in that car recognized me," she said. "How could—?"

The secretary to whom they'd been speaking took a phone call and turned it over to Father Brown. He listened intently and then hung up. "That was Father Rudolpho himself. He may have found your missing tape."

"What?"

"Come on! There's no time to waste!"

They took a taxi to a rectory outside the Vatican walls, where a number of teaching priests resided. Father Rudolpho greeted them in his shirtsleeves, without his collar. "Forgive my appearance," he told Laura. "I hadn't realized you would be along."

"Where is this tape, Father?"

He opened a drawer and brought it out. "It was with a group of taped sermons I had in my bag. I'd removed these after last month's trip and I had different ones with me the night of the robbery attempt. I was preparing to take these back to Milano with me when I noticed one was different from the rest."

Laura stared at the tape cassette in her hand. It was imprinted with the call letters of a small radio station in a town near Milan. "Did you play it?"

The priest nodded. "It is our Minister of Justice—the one who was kidnaped last month."

"I have to telephone Sebastian and Inspector Matita," she said. "They're at police headquarters."

"You may use that phone."

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As she dialed the number she tried to make conversation with the tall white-haired priest. "You look so different without your collar, Father."

He smiled at Father Brown. "Did you think we wore them to bed?"

"No, it's just that—"

She stopped in mid-sentence and stared at them both. "Of course! What a fool I've been!" And then Sebastian was on the line. "Sebastian, we've located the tape! I'll give you the call letters of a radio station near Milan. The police should raid it at once. Tell them to especially concentrate on any out-of-the-way building like a transmitter where the Minister of Justice could be held prisoner."

He copied down the information. "Matita will get right on it."

"One more thing, Sebastian. Tell him to check on the Rome address of Father Jessup, the priest who was chloroformed the morning I arrived in Rome."

"Father Jessup?"

"That's right. If he's back in Rome after his drive to Grosseto the other night, I think we'll have Rosa Impegno's partner in crime."

"Why Jessup?"

"Because he was wearing a Roman collar when they carried him off the train that morning, and he was supposed to have been asleep!" She glanced at the two priests. "They don't wear their collars to bed, you know. He chloroformed himself and probably dropped the spray can out the train window before the drug knocked him out. He was traveling back and forth so often he faked the attack so no one would become suspicious of him. He wanted to be found wearing a collar so they'd immediately connect him with the attacks on the priests—but not being a real priest it never occurred to him how foolish it was to be in bed with it on. I should have thought of Jessup earlier. He was the only victim who wasn't above average in height. I don't know if he's really an American or not. The accent might be faked."

"We'll get on it," Sebastian promised.

The following evening, before flying back to Paris, Sebastian and Laura had dinner with Father Brown and Father Rudolpho. The Minister of Justice had been rescued and the bogus Father Jessup was in custody.

"Do your cases always conclude so successfully?" Father Brown asked Laura as he filled their glasses with wine.

She blushed a bit and replied, "Usually they do, Father, after one or two false starts."

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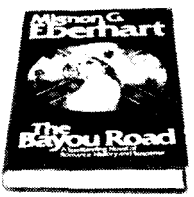

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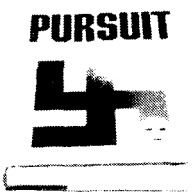

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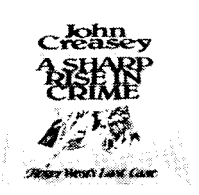

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